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Twitter as Consciousness-Raising: An Analysis of the 2017 #MeToo Movement

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Twitter as Consciousness-Raising:

An Analysis of the 2017 #MeToo Movement

By

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An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for Graduation from the
Western Oregon University Honors Program

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Glossary:

To fully understand the movement, as well as this thesis, we must first understand the terminology surrounding it. Unless otherwise noted, these definitions are defined by the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), an organization that works to educate about sexual assault, as well as eradicate these social issues.

Sexual assault: this term encompasses physical acts such as attempted rape, fondling, and rape. These examples are largely considered to be criminal acts.

Sexual harassment: unwanted verbal and physical attention that violates civil liberties, but, in many cases, is not a criminal act. Examples may include a superior massaging an employee's shoulders while discussing the latest company reports, or a coworker commenting on a colleague's body. While these occurrences are not technically illegal, they certainly fall under the category of unwanted sexual attention and can be considered sexual harassment.

Sexual abuse: this term can be defined as nonconsensual physical (but can be verbal) sexual attention, but is typically more forceful than harassment.

Examples include rape, groping, or other forced sexual acts. These are criminal acts and can be punishable by law.

Sexual violence: this term is slightly broader than sexual assault, and includes occurrences of stalking and domestic violence. It also includes acts that might not be explicitly criminal in nature, like sexual coercion and manipulation.

It is important to note that some state and/or country laws define these terms differently, which affects criminal repercussions perpetrators may face. For the purpose of this thesis, I will be using the phrase sexual assault and sexual

harassment, as those are the terms used in Alyssa Milano's tweet, and largely used in discussions of the #MeToo movement.

Abstract:

Sexual assault and harassment have always been a societal taboo. Individuals who have shared their experiences with sexual misconduct in the past have been heavily shamed and ridiculed, which prevented a lot of individuals from sharing their experiences, out of a fear of being labeled a liar, or worse. However, sexual assault and harassment are not uncommon in society, and the #MeToo movement allowed the discourse surrounding these issues to be brought to the forefront of society. This thesis sought to analyze the discourse within and surrounding the 2017 #MeToo movement, ignited on Twitter by actor and activist Alyssa Milano. To do this, I developed a comprehensive background to the movement, including a discussion surrounding the concept of consciousness-raising groups and the historical context of such groups. I analyzed select tweets from both Milano and other prominent Twitter accounts from October 15, 2017, which I separated into four key themes. Also included is a discussion surrounding the lack of intersectionality within the movement, and why that is ultimately harmful to the cause. In addition to the inherent importance of speaking out against the occurrences of sexual assault and sexual harassment, this thesis explores the use of social media as digital consciousness-raising groups, with a specific focus on the social media site Twitter. This thesis has determined that Milano was able to create a Twitter consciousness-raising group, as well as discussing how the #MeToo movement represents social media's contribution to creating social change.

Introduction:

Widely considered to be the catalyst for the #MeToo movement, a *New York Times* article detailing the decades of accusations against convicted sex offender and former film producer Harvey Weinstein broke on October 5, 2017. The authors of *The New York Times* article have written about their experience in “She Said: Breaking the Sexual Harassment Story That Helped Ignite a Movement,” where they mentioned that after the story broke, “we watched with astonishment as a dam wall broke. Millions of women around the world told their own stories of mistreatment” (Kantor and Twohey, 2019). Weinstein, who has been accused of sexual harassment and/or assault by over 80 women, has since been convicted of one count of sexual assault and one count of rape, and has been sentenced to 23 years in prison.

Ten days after the Weinstein article broke, on October 15, 2017, at 1:21 p.m. PST, actor and activist Alyssa Milano tweeted, “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet.” It was shared alongside the image shown below in **Figure 1**:

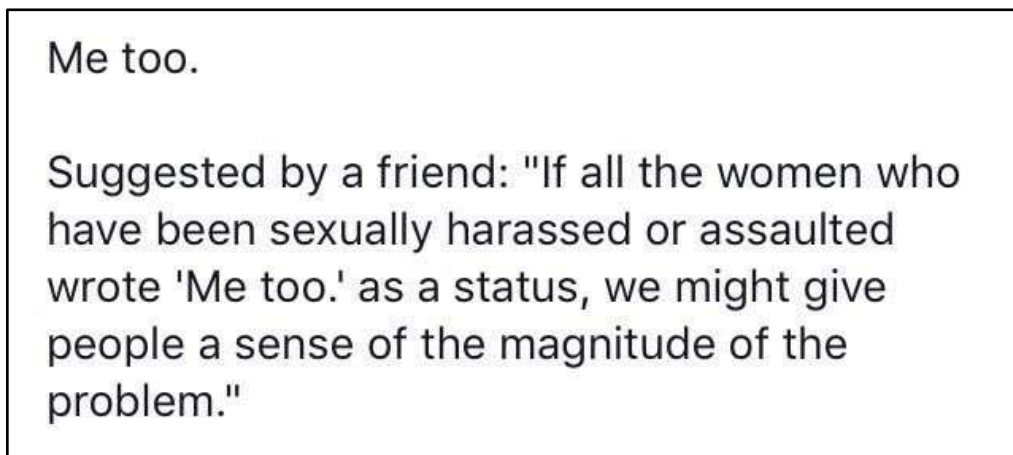


Figure 1, courtesy of Alyssa Milano (@Alyssa_Milano)

This tweet ignited the Twitter movement that soon became to be known as the #MeToo movement, and the hashtag was used nearly 20 million times in the first year alone (PEW Research Center). Celebrity followers of Milano, as well as the general public, chimed in with their own stories of sexual harassment and sexual assault. Now, over three years after Milano's instigation, the initial tweet boasts over 20,000 retweets and nearly 50,000 likes, with thousands of replies. Articles about the #MeToo movement appeared on most every major national news outlet, including The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Atlantic, and NBC News. The phrase has become synonymous with sharing stories of sexual assault and sexual harassment, and created a community of victims and allies, allowing individuals to share their deeply personal stories, and work toward ending the stigma that surrounds sexual assault and harassment victims. Milano has since expressed that her intention with the movement was to create an "opportunity [to share experiences with sexual assault/harassment] without having to go into detail about their stories if they did not want to."

Milano, known best for her role as Phoebe Halliwell on The WB's *Charmed*, has used her celebrity status to advocate for various causes, most prominently the #MeToo movement. Milano, who was born in New York City, identifies as a heterosexual, cisgender, white woman with Italian ancestry. She has been a champion of other causes, such as the legalization of abortion, Black Lives Matter, climate change, affordable healthcare, and a raised minimum wage. Milano has been an avid political activist, especially in the years post-2016, and actively campaigned for President Joe Biden and Georgia Senators Reverend Raphael Warnock and Jon

Ossoff in 2020 and 2021. Looking through her Twitter account, it is evident that she uses it primarily to advocate for these causes, both through her personal tweets and those that she retweets.

While many falsely credit Milano with the creation of the movement, the #MeToo movement actually began over a decade earlier. African American female activist, Tarana Burke, coined the phrase in 2006, using the term on the social media platform Myspace. Burke also wore the phrase on a t-shirt to a protest calling for an end to rape culture. She is the founder of JustBeInc., which is an organization dedicated to “the health, well-being, and wholeness of young women of color.” The organization strives to assist victims of sexual assault and/or sexual harassment. On the website, Burke mentions that after listening to a young woman’s experience with sexual assault, she

could not muster the energy to tell her that I understood, that I connected, that I could feel her pain. I couldn't help her release her shame, or impress upon her that nothing that happened to her was her fault. I could not find the strength to say out loud the words that were ringing in my head over and over again as she tried to tell me what she had endured... I watched her walk away from me as she tried to recapture her secrets and tuck them back into their hiding place. I watched her put her mask back on and go back into the world like she was all alone and I couldn't even bring myself to whisper...me too.

In honor of her contributions to the #MeToo movement, Burke was named one of Time Magazine’s People of the Year for 2017, sharing the magazine cover with a

group dubbed “the silence breakers.” Later in this thesis, I will discuss the issue of Milano being credited for Burke’s work, as well as the social ramifications of a white woman being able to publicly instigate a movement a Black woman had been working toward for over a decade.

In this thesis, I analyze select tweets from the movement to determine whether or not Twitter was utilized as a consciousness-raising group. I argue that, while the movement has its faults, including and especially a lack of intersectionality, the movement was able to create a platform where victims could share their stories and receive support from an entire community (i.e. a consciousness-raising group). This research is important because it showcases the inherent significance of consciousness-raising, and how these groups can ultimately advocate for and produce social change.

With the publication of my thesis, I hope to expand the discourse surrounding the #MeToo movement, as well as provide evidence that the movement was able to utilize Twitter as a consciousness-raising platform. While prior studies add depth to the discourse surrounding the 2017 #MeToo movement, there are certain drawbacks that exist. Many prior studies that have been conducted do not emphasize intersectionality, as they tend to focus on women, and ignore the voices of men and transfolk¹. Likewise, due to the systematic racism that infiltrates every aspect of American society, the voices of people of color are continuously pushed aside to highlight the voice of white individuals. In order to avoid this within my

¹ Although some scholars differentiate between transgender individuals and non-binary individuals, I will be using transfolk as an umbrella term to refer to trans men, trans women, and trans non-binary individuals, as per the LGBT Foundation (<https://lgbt.foundation/who-we-help/trans-people/non-binary>).

thesis, I will be focusing on the inclusion of tweets by men, LGBTQ+ individuals, and POC. This is not to say that white, cishet women will not be included, but I will be making a concentrated effort to ensure that the tweets are as intersectional as possible. Another area in which previous studies failed to provide a thorough analysis of the movement is the lack of context to the tweets. To counter this, my thesis will be an analysis on select tweets, allowing me to fully analyze the language and rhetorical features of each tweet. I will not be conducting a mass analysis, as I will instead be analyzing each tweet closely and individually, before applying it to the larger movement.

Before #MeToo:

Prior to the 2017 movement, other individuals attempted to spark similar movements, including the hashtags #IAmNotAfraidToSpeakUp and #WhyWomenDontReport. In July of 2016, Ukrainian journalist Anastasia Melnichenko used the hashtag #IAmNotAfraidToSpeakUp to acknowledge victims of sexual assault and/or sexual harassment, and end the stigma surrounding speaking out against perpetrators. Thousands of Russians and Ukrainians joined the movement to share their experiences with sexual assault and harassment.

While many individuals shared their personal experiences within the #IAmNotAfraidToSpeakUp movement, others were granted the opportunity to learn about the prevalence of sexual assault, rather than actively experience it. Alexey Ezhikov, from Russia, penned an excellent op-ed centered around his perspective of the social movements against sexual abuse and sexual harassment. He outlined how

some individuals--specifically men--feel listening to stories of sexual assault, how some react to this news, how they try to justify the existence of sexual assault (i.e. blaming it on the victim, rather than addressing the crimes of the perpetrator), and how, hopefully, others can eventually recognize and actively advocate against sexual assault. Unfortunately, the article is framed as if women are the only individuals who experience sexual assault, and men and transfolk are thus excluded from the narrative. People of all genders have experienced sexual assault and harassment, and to exclude individuals from the discourse on the basis of their sex or gender identity is ultimately harmful to both the individuals and to the movement as a whole.

Ezhikov outlined a few emotions individuals might feel when hearing about a victim's experience with sexual assault. The audience might feel fear, disgust, or anger, either directed toward the victim or the perpetrator. They might react in a way that Ezhikov calls "irrelevant mirroring," which is when an individual detracts from the topic at hand to discuss an unrelated topic. The example used within the article is that when a female victim speaks up, some individuals might respond "well, men are victims of sexual assault and harassment as well." While this statement is certainly true, individuals who use these types of statements are typically trying to deflect from the movement, rather than increase inclusivity.

There are many reasons as to why an individual might try to devalue movements against sexual assault and harassment. Some interpret these movements as anti-men, or as painting men as the sole perpetrators of sexual misconduct, so a common response is anger, based out of fear or disgust. Others

might try to devalue the victim's experiences, question a victim's recollection of the event, or decrease the severity of the event. Others might blame the victim entirely, saying it was their fault based on a variety of factors (like their clothing, their actions, or their intoxication level). Unfortunately, this greatly affects how and when a victim might choose to share their story: "This stigma attached to rape victims often leads to rejection by peers, society, and institutions to which the victim belongs. Therefore, victims must consider what relationships, positions, and lifestyles they will be jeopardizing by going public with their story" (Kahn-Lang, 2008).

These reasons for devaluing the movement correlate closely with reasons victims choose not to report: victims might fear that there will be a lack of belief if they choose to share their experience; they might feel guilt or partial blame for the event; they might feel their accusation cannot be substantiated by evidence; among other reasons for not reporting sexual assault or harassment. (Khan, et. al., 2018). Victims have faced extreme backlash whether they report crimes committed against them, or they choose to stay silent. Many individuals blame victims for not speaking up immediately after sexual assault or harassment occurs, and thus, blame the victims for any further crimes committed by the perpetrator. Victims are susceptible to accusations like, "If it was [true], you would name names,"² and debates surrounding whether or not they were truly assaulted.³ Other victims experience attacks against their appearance, like when former President Donald Trump

² Response to a Medium article where author Kelly Yang shared her story of sexual assault at Harvard Law School.

³ Comment made by reality star Stassi Schroeder on her podcast, *Straight Up with Stassi*.

responded to an allegation of sexual assault by saying, “Look at her. ... I don’t think so.”

To better understand why, when, and how victims choose to share their stories, we first need to better understand the hardships surrounding their decision to do so. In late 2016, approximately a year prior to Milano’s #MeToo tweet, Twitter users engaged in #WhyWomenDontReport, sharing their personal reasons for staying silent about the sexual assault and harassment they faced. These reasons included fear of retribution, loss of private life, fear of disbelief, and/or a lack of substantial evidence (Khan, et. al., 2018). Actor, activist, and Milano’s co-star on the WB show *Charmed*, Rose McGowan, added her voice to the hashtag, stating, “Because it’s been an open secret in Hollywood/Media & they shamed me while adulating my rapist. #WhyWomenDontReport.” McGowan’s tweet highlights that sexual assault was prevalent in Hollywood/ the entertainment industry *and* that others were aware of it and did not act to end it. Twitter user @JasleeneJ shared that they did not report because “Silence is easier and safer than uprooting your whole life. #WhyWomenDontReport.” User @SofieRKarasak shared that women do not report because “bystanders or video evidence are required for anyone believe you [sic]. See: Brock Turner, Donald Trump. #WhyWomenDontReport.” Others cited possible loss of career or academic advancements for reasons they did not share their stories earlier.

While originally this hashtag gained traction in October of 2016, it was revisited during the hearings of SCOTUS Associate Judge Brett Kavanaugh. Dr. Christine Blasey Ford accused Kavanaugh of sexual assault when they were both

teenagers. This spurred a multiday hearing, wherein both Kavanaugh and Dr. Ford were extensively interviewed about the alleged assault, and eventually, Kavanaugh was sworn in as a Justice to the Supreme Court. As a direct result of Kavanaugh's nomination, hearings, and eventual appointment to SCOTUS, social media users flocked to Twitter to share their disappointment. Twitter user @RachellLarris echoed previous users of the hashtag when they mused that "#WhyWomenDontReport Because if they're the only witness to their attack Sen. John Cornyn says they can't report." If there is not an outside witness or other concrete evidence to prove that the crime occurred, which regarding both sexual harassment and sexual assault there rarely is, victims are much less likely to be believed (Tuerkheimer, 2017). Dr. Ford echoed this sentiment herself, stating:

I have had to relive this trauma in front of the world, and have seen my life picked apart by people on television, on Twitter, other social media, other media, and in this body, who have never met with me or spoken with me. I am an independent person and I am no one's pawn. My motivation in coming forward was to be helpful and to provide facts about how Mr. Kavanaugh's actions have damaged my life, so that you could take into serious consideration as you make your decision about how to proceed.

To share her story, Dr. Ford had to relive a wholly traumatic experience in front of an audience of millions, revealing intimate details of herself. She was repeatedly questioned as to why she was speaking up then, rather than when the alleged assault occurred.

As well, there exist certain internal factors that inhibit victims from openly discussing their experiences with sexual assault and sexual harassment. Vocalizing these experiences can be incredibly tasking, and there, unfortunately, exists a lot of internal shame that accompanies sexual assault and sexual harassment. Victims may blame themselves for what happened, ruminating over what they could have done differently or how they might have prevented assault or harassment from occurring. In a study in the Journal of American College Health, the authors discuss some of the possible internal factors that contribute to this reluctance to report or discuss assault or harassment: "Shame, guilt, and embarrassment - not wanting friends and family members to know about the rape or sexual assault - continue to dominate victims' concerns. The failure to report a rape or sexual assault can result from victim's self-blame, with its concomitant feelings of fear, guilt, and shame" (Sable, et. al., 2006). In one tweet for #WhyIDidntReport, Twitter user @blkfaerie shared that they believed they deserved it:

#WhyIDidntReport

Because I was a party girl at university

Because I went home with him

Because I thought everyone would say I asked for it

Because I thought this was just what happened when you partied too hard

Because I thought no one would believe me

I thought I deserved it

Unfortunately, this internalized shame or blame greatly affects victims' likelihood of coming forward and speaking up about their experiences (Khan, et. al, 2018).

Consciousness-Raising Groups:

Movements like the ones discussed above highlight the inherent importance of consciousness-raising groups, as they allow participants to realize that sexual assault and harassment are not individual experiences (i.e. a pervasive and societal issue), as well as joining a community wherein others have direct experiences with these issues and can offer reassurance and validation. Consciousness raising groups are defined as groups of individuals gathering to discuss their personal experiences and to create a community of support. Throughout history, consciousness-raising groups have largely been composed of primarily women, and were created in the hopes of challenging societal norms, mainly surrounding gender roles, domesticity, and women's rights. Though these groups had been around informally for many years, these groups began taking a more formal shape in the 1960s when The Women's Collective established a set of rules and guidelines in the early 1970s. The role of consciousness-raising groups and their ability to incite social change cannot be overstated.

When discussing consciousness-raising groups, we need to first understand their early beginnings. Prior to the 1960s, consciousness-raising groups were more personal and intimate, rather than existing within an instructional group-like setting. These early groups might have consisted of women sharing personal stories between friends, family members, or community members. Participants shared their experiences in-person, without the parameters that were often placed on the later groups (like the guidelines established by The Women's Collective). Women participating in this sharing of experiences broke societal norms to discuss issues

that so often went undiscussed. Taboo subjects were suddenly spoken about out loud, including subjects like sexual assault, gender roles, dissatisfaction of life within the home, etc. Within these groups, women discussed how patriarchal structures within society have directly affected their lives, and they were able to express their unhappiness and discontent with their lives in a group setting.

These consciousness-raising movements shaped feminist theory and history by allowing women a space to share their discontent, and the discussions had in these groups led to the development of feminist theories and protests. In fact, the idea for the 1968 Miss America Pageant Protest was initially sparked in a consciousness-raising group (Hanisch, 2010). This protest consisted of feminist activists protesting outside the pageant, encouraging women's liberation and an end to the Miss America pageant. This is a concrete example of consciousness-raising groups instigating change outside of the group itself. Consciousness-raising groups also helped to form protests against what Hanisch calls a woman's uniform (like high heels and skirts) which were outward expressions of a woman's inferior societal position. We cannot dismiss these grassroots origins of the movement, as these early consciousness-raising groups are what shaped feminist theory and history, and have ultimately led into the development of modern digital consciousness-raising spaces.

Consciousness-raising has been discussed extensively in academia in the decades that followed the creation of the more formal groups, including by many who have updated this discourse as new and more public forms of consciousness-raising have emerged. For example, scholar Lindsay Kelland (2016) discussed the

importance of “consciousness-raising speak-outs” and how they benefit rape/sexual assault survivors. Kelland writes that narratives are vital to social change because they allow participants to realize that their experiences are likely shared between members, and they allow for unionization. Kelland also discussed the ways in which these “speak-outs” relate to rape and sexual assault survivors, which is closely related to this thesis. She argues that “feminist consciousness-raising speak-outs remain essential to contemporary feminist theory and activism, particularly in terms of ameliorating the harms experienced by women that result directly from patriarchal structures, norms, and ideals” (Kelland, 2016). However, an important aspect to note is that Kelland does focus on women as rape and sexual assault survivors, which unfortunately limits the intersectionality of the paper, as it appears to exclude men and transfolk from the discussion.

Su-Lin Yu (2011) expanded on the inherent importance of consciousness-raising groups, discussing how vital personal narratives are to third-wave feminism, which are an aspect of consciousness-raising groups. The article highlighted how personal narratives drive movements; that is, the experiences that individuals face shape the political or social actions taken by the group. Unfortunately, there is a somewhat common ideology that third-wave feminism is not grounded in theory, but Yu argued that the personal narratives *are* theory: “Personal narratives allow for more complicated understandings of feminist identity, community, and history” (Yu, 2011). If we choose to exclude personal narratives from feminist discussion, we are denying insight into the daily lives that individuals within the group face. However, like Kelland, it is important to note that Yu focused on the personal

narratives of women in the article, and, while these narratives are vital to social movements, the lack of intersectionality ultimately limits voices.

Sowards and Renegar (2004) developed framework that helps us conceptualize what consciousness-raising is, and how it defines feminist movements. According to the authors, there are five important aspects of consciousness-raising in regard to third-wave feminism.

1. **Personal stories:** Like mentioned above, personal narratives are vital to movements, and are used to gain insight into what the group members experience. By looking at personal stories, we can better understand the issues that are affecting group members, and thus incite social change to work toward solving these issues. Personal narratives are the backbone of consciousness-raising, as the early origins of the groups were centered around women gathering to share their concerns about their lives in a safe space.
2. **Consciousness-raising in the classroom:** Consciousness-raising will likely not incite much change if it exists in a bubble: that is, we must be fully immersed in and devoted to consciousness-raising, and allow it to infiltrate everyday spaces. The creation of feminism-focused classes allowed students to participate in the discussion surrounding feminist issues, and for other voices to be included in the discussion.
3. **Popular culture and mass-mediated consciousness-raising:** Perhaps the most vital to this thesis, the authors mention that the discussion of consciousness-raising can exist outside of academia, and be present in

television, movies, and other forms of media. Strong female media characters aid in the female empowerment and the rectification of social issues that shape consciousness-raising. It is important to note that this type of consciousness-raising differs greatly from the in-person groups of the 1970s, but remains a vital aspect of social change.

4. **Diverse experiences and audience:** Sowards and Renegar emphasize the importance of researching and understanding perspectives outside of one's own. This relates to the overarching theme of personal narratives; listening to and discussing with others allows us to broaden our understanding of the challenges group members face.
5. **Options for self-expression:** It is important to understand that not every group member will have the vocabulary necessary to accurately express their experiences and opinions within a consciousness-raising setting. There needs to be no expectation of experience, as it should allow members to discuss their thoughts as best they can: "Not only does feminist consciousness-raising provide women and men with a vocabulary to describe their experiences, but it also helps illuminate the interconnected nature of oppression and inculcate a more critical perspective on the world" (Sowards and Renegar, 2004).

These frameworks help us to better conceptualize the different forms consciousness-raising groups can take, and how what works for one individual may not work for another. The important thing is that there are a multitude of options for consciousness-raising, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

Now, consciousness-raising groups look considerably different than those in years past. With the emergence of digital spaces like social media, text messaging, and online forums, consciousness-raising is now able to transcend some of the earlier barriers to participating in the movement. Online spaces have greatly increased the accessibility of consciousness-raising, as there is no longer a necessity for a physical space. Participants can discuss issues with individuals across the world in seconds, and mass numbers of individuals can participate easily. All that is needed is an internet connection (which is a limitation, and will be discussed later in this thesis), and, perhaps, a social media account, and users can join the movement.

An important aspect of consciousness-raising groups that has been discussed in some of the surrounding literature is that they do not necessarily seek to create social change. The purpose of consciousness-raising is, inherently, to raise consciousness and to increase awareness surrounding a certain issue. Of course, consciousness-raising often has the effect of producing social change, but it is not always an explicit goal. “Third wave feminists share their stories, listen to others' stories, consume popular culture in ways that they find empowering, and create new vocabularies to enhance their own lives, but these activities do not necessarily lead to social activism in its traditional forms” (Sowards and Renegar, 2004). However, I argue that social change is a recognized and actively pursued aspect to consciousness-raising, rather than a byproduct, especially within the digital age. Now more than ever, we can recognize the concrete changes unified peoples can make, especially with the usage of social media.

Consciousness-Raising Guidelines:

The Chicago Women’s Liberation Union (CWLU)⁴ compiled fairly strict definitions for what constitutes a consciousness-raising group. I chose this group’s guidelines for consciousness-raising because they are considered to be the “most significant of the socialist feminist women’s unions established during the “second wave” feminist movement,” and actively fought against racism, while advocating for LGBTQ+ liberation. It is important to note that these “guidelines” were written approximately 50 years ago, so it is necessary to adapt these guidelines to fit frameworks of the 2020s. For the purpose of this thesis, I will be updating certain guidelines to fit a modern perspective. After the tweet analysis, I will be revisiting these guidelines to determine whether or not the #MeToo movement fits the criteria.

ORIGINAL: “No men allowed at women’s Consciousness-raising sections this year; maybe next year. Separate male groups are probably possible if they are initiated by males.”

ADAPTED: All individuals are invited to participate in a consciousness-raising group, unless other criteria is otherwise stated (i.e. a WOC-specific group or a LGBTQ+ group). Individuals of all races, sexualities, genders, ages, and religions are welcome to join.

Unfortunately, the original guideline frames consciousness-raising as a female-only group, which, in the 1970s, was a valid exclusion to make, as it allowed for a female-

⁴ The CWLU (1969 to 1976) was established during second-wave feminism, and played an integral role in women’s liberation in 1970s Chicago.

dominated space, where women could discuss issues within their lives without the presence of men (Black Maria, 1971). However, in the current era, I want to broaden this guideline to include voices of marginalized peoples. This adapted guideline pushes for inclusivity in a way the prior one did not.

ORIGINAL: “Speak about the experience of being a woman. Do not stray to topics which are unrelated. Although we are always women, not all our experiences bear direct or obvious relation to this fact.”

ADAPTED: Speak about your experience on the subject matter (in this case, sexual assault and harassment). Feel free to discuss elements of intersectionality (i.e. the identity factors that contributed to your experience). Use related experience, as needed, but be careful to not stray too far from the main issue.

This guideline does not need to be majorly changed, but I do want to reframe this guideline as one for all peoples, rather than using the specific wording of women, as the experiences of cisgender women are not the only experiences that matter within this movement. I also wanted to make it clear that intersectionality is closely related to experiences with sexual assault and harassment, so it is important that the adapted guideline makes it clear that talking about intersectionality is encouraged.

ORIGINAL: “While we are trying to discover our own sexism and the sexism which has victimized us, we try to avoid the traps of classism, racism, and age—ism. When younger exclude older, or older refer to younger in put—down terminology (such as referring to 20-year-olds as young girls) we are letting another ugly ism creep in.”

ADAPTED: While speaking about personal experiences, do not devalue the experiences of others. Classism, racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, ageism, xenophobia, etc. all contribute to an individual's specific experience with sexual assault. Allow speakers to speak freely and openly, without belittling their experiences.

While the original guideline is fairly inclusive, I do feel as though it needs to be expanded to include these other 'isms.' While the avoidance of racism, classism, and ageism are important in modern day consciousness-raising, there also needs to be a conscious effort to avoid transphobia, homophobia, misogyny, xenophobia, etc.

Other guidelines need to be reworked because they speak of a physical space to meet and discuss, which is unavailable in the digital space I will be talking about in my thesis. It's important to adapt these guidelines (and it is listed in the guidelines that they can change depending on the specific group and how it needs to run) to fit the digitized world. These rules were written in the early 1970s, so it's of no surprise that they need to change slightly to fit a consciousness-raising group in the late 2010s/ early 2020s. I will be applying these guidelines to the tweets from the movement to analyze how the #MeToo movement was able to utilize Twitter as a digital consciousness-raising platform, and to better understand the criteria for consciousness-raising. Using these guidelines will help to contextualize what the movement was able to achieve, as well as aid in understanding how future movements can utilize social media platforms to ignite consciousness-raising and further social change.

Discussion of specific tweets within the movement:

In 2018, researchers at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute conducted a study highlighting the difference in language used on two popular social media platforms during the #MeToo movement: Twitter and Reddit. The study used tweets using the hashtag “#MeToo,” and posts on the r/metoo subreddit. The data indicated that Reddit users were more likely to share in-depth descriptions of sexual harassment and assault, while Twitter posts showed more empathy and encouragement to others to speak up. This is largely due to the usage of the platforms: Twitter allows for a maximum of 280 characters per tweet, while Reddit posts can be much longer. This data is incredibly relevant, as it emphasizes the idea that Twitter served as a digital consciousness-raising space during the 2017 #MeToo movement. It also echoes other articles’ findings on the importance of personal narratives. While this study is a great addition to the movement, it does unfortunately lack a larger context to the tweets, as the authors state themselves: “Words such as movement is co-occurring with words such as hysterical, nonsense and it is not very clear if users are mocking the #metoo movement.” (Manikonda, et. al., 2018). As the study encapsulated such a large spectrum of tweets, it was impossible to understand the context the words were used in. However, with my analysis of the tweets, we are able to more clearly understand the major themes of the movement, as well as why individuals chose to participate.

To accurately portray the #MeToo movement, we must look at the tweets themselves, including what Twitter users were saying, what individuals were given salience and power within the movement, and what were the responses (i.e. the

communities created underneath each tweet). Celebrities rushed to participate in the movement; underneath Milano's tweet, we can see responses from prominent figures, like Lea Thompson, Rosario Dawson, Mia Farrow, Cassidy Gard, Anna Paquin, Sophia Bush, Laura Dreyfuss, and Debra Messing. What one might note is that the majority of verified tweets underneath Milano's tweet are white, affluent women, which yet again hints to the lack of intersectionality within the movement. However, there is still validity to the tweets from these women; I am not seeking to exclude cisgender white women from the movement, just seeking to emphasize the inherent privilege Milano and others like her have within this type of social movement. White women played a vital role within the movement, and it would be harmful to devalue their contributions, but it is paramount to recognize the privileges afforded to them in order to gain such traction in this movement.

My goal in analyzing this movement was to employ a methodology that allows for both an accurate portrayal of the movement and gives voices to individuals who may have been marginalized (for a plethora of reasons). To accurately portray the movement, I have chosen to include tweets that meet one or more of the following criteria:

- 1) tweet is from a verified Twitter account
- 2) the tweet has at least 100 retweets or 1,000 likes or
- 3) the tweet has been republished by a major news organization.

As I am also interested in granting salience to underrepresented identities during the movement, I sought out tweets from a variety of individuals, with a specific focus on members of the LGBTQ+ community, people of color, and men (who are

certainly not underrepresented in media, but I do want to include tweets from men, who can be and are victims of sexual assault and sexual harassment).

Through my analysis of over 100 tweets from the #MeToo movement, I have been able to identify four major themes within the movement: the hesitation to share stories of sexual assault and harassment; embracement of traditional consciousness-raising elements (i.e. the emphasis on personal narratives and community); the pervasiveness of sexual assault and harassment, and the recognition that these issues are systemic; and refocusing the narrative on the perpetrators of sexual assault and harassment. I was also able to identify what the movement is lacking, which is intersectionality.

#1: Silence and Shame

Many of the tweets I found featured a sense of shame or embarrassment upon retelling the events of sexual assault or harassment. Twitter user @ccstreeter expressed that they were “Too afraid to make a #MeToo Facebook status because my parents will see and I don’t want to disappoint them HOW MESSED UP IS THAT [sic].” This Twitter user was not alone in their hesitation; Twitter user @VieuxCaRaye shared their personal experience with this hesitation, sharing that “I hesitated before participating in the #MeToo "campaign. Then I asked myself, why? I was embarrassed/ That's the problem. No more. #MeToo.” These two tweets highlight an incredibly important aspect to the stigma surrounding sexual assault and sexual harassment victims, as there unfortunately exists shame surrounding victims who choose to share their stories, especially within the public sphere. It also

showcases the blame, both external and internal, that can be placed upon the victims of sexual assault and harassment.

Another prominent theme within the tweets, and one that fits closely with shame, is silence, either an individual acknowledging their own or validating another's silence. Twitter user @apbenven reminded participants that "[...]if a woman didn't post #MeToo, it doesn't mean she wasn't sexually assaulted or harassed. Survivors don't owe you their story." Some individuals may not feel comfortable broadcasting their stories to the public, and many users tweeted their support of those who did not wish to or those who were not ready to share their stories. These tweets also fit closely with the theme of community, as many tweets included encouragement and validation, but the specific mention of silence separates it from that theme. These tweets allowed participants, whether they posted online or simply viewed the tweets, to recognize the emotional and mental toll sharing these deeply personal stories can have on an individual. I also wanted to highlight the plethora of tweets that either replied to or retweeted Milano's tweet with the words "me too." These tweets showcase a potential reluctance to broadcast details about sexual assault and harassment while still participating within the movement. It also shows the opportunity granted by the movement, as participants could add their voice to the movement without sharing deeply personal stories, which many are hesitant to do.

These reasons for staying silent are actually quite common, according to a study conducted by researchers from Columbia University and New York State Psychiatric Institute at Columbia University Medical Center. In the study, the

researchers conducted over 150 interviews at both Columbia University and Barnard College, where they asked participants why they chose not to label, tell, or report a sexual assault. Two of the biggest risk factors surrounding labelling, telling, or reporting sexual assault were found to be identity and interpersonal risks. The researchers define telling as “communicating that experience to someone else” (Khan, et. al, 2018). Identity risks encompasses both how an individual views themselves, and how they feel they are perceived by others. Interpersonal risks encompass how individuals are actually treated by those surrounding them. Another possible reason for victims to choose not to report sexual abuse and harassment is the mental stigma that exists with labeling oneself a victim:

Not labeling or reporting allows them to psychologically downplay the experience, to avoid confronting it regularly, to refuse to see themselves as victims, to persuade themselves that a very difficult thing didn’t happen, or to continue to understand the person who assaulted them (often someone they know well and about whom they care) as a good person, friend, or partner (Khan, et. al, 2018).

Unfortunately, these negative perceptions of sexual abuse and harassment victims exist, both internally and externally. Many of these same risks can be seen through the tweets mentioned above, as well as throughout the hashtag. While this study was conducted specifically in regard to college-age individuals, it can be applicable to the larger society as to why sexual assault and harassment go unreported, and why it is so important to create open and honest discussions surrounding the issue.

Though silence and shame were common, so too were victims sharing their dissatisfaction with having to share their stories in such a public way. For example, Twitter user @reappropriate posted “#MeToo, but also why must survivors dredge up our pain and put it on display just to get ppl [sic] to care abt [sic] sexual harassment & sexual assault?” Many of these tweets questioned why the onus is on the victim to relay what many consider the worst moment of their lives in order for others to recognize that sexual assault and harassment are prevalent issues. Twitter user @leenewtonsays shared “Boy do I hate that as women we have to rip open and expose some of the most traumatic events of our lives to be seen as people but... #metoo.” Another user, @hanp93, offered their opinion on this topic, writing, “I shouldn't have to share the story of the most humiliating night of my life for men to know that sexual assault is bad #HimThough #MeToo.” Yet another user, @empathywarrior, shared their wish for a shift in the movement: “I wish #MeToo was rapists and assailants admitting to being trash humans instead of survivors having to bare their souls.” As well, individuals who share their stories, especially those who share their stories in such a public way, are opening themselves up to mass amounts of criticism and victim-blaming.

A common criticism against those who choose not to report sexual assault is that they are endangering others by allowing the perpetrator to roam free. This viewpoint places such an egregious emphasis on victims to share deeply personal and, as we have seen, sometimes embarrassing, experiences to the public. Likewise, it does not take the victim's cognitive process into account:

Countering those who argue that silence about a sexual assault perpetuates community risk by allowing someone who committed an assault to “go free,” those who did not report their experience thought of themselves in different moral terms: as a person who is able to turn the other cheek and allow a second chance for growth and transformation (Khan, et. al., 2018).

The fact is, sharing stories of sexual assault and harassment is a difficult and personal decision, and the blame should not be placed upon the victims.

What these tweets show us is how deeply personal and sometimes deeply humiliating sharing stories can be for victims. There is a necessity for open, honest conversations surrounding sexual assault and harassment, and a positive space for victims to share their stories. Twitter granted this space to victims, some of whom were sharing their experiences for the very first time. For some participants, it was incredibly difficult to share their experiences so publicly, but it opened up discussions surrounding the stigma about sexual assault and harassment victims. Why should they be embarrassed or humiliated? Through no fault of their own, they were assaulted or harassed, yet they are the ones who bear the shame. This shows the ever-important nature of earnest discussions surrounding sexual assault and harassment, a vital aspect to consciousness-raising.

#2: Personal Narratives

Another huge element to the #MeToo movement was the sharing of personal narratives, which helped a) to emphasize the severity and prevalence of sexual assault and harassment, and b) to create a sense of community between

participants. Across Twitter, there did not appear to be a level of uniformity regarding how much participants were willing to share. Some offered threads discussing what happened to them, while other participants chose to share minimal details. Actress Marlee Martin shared her personal story on Twitter, saying, “#MeToo. I was 14, he was 36. I may be Deaf, but silence is the last thing you will ever hear from me.” Former NRA spokesperson Dana Loesch chose to go into more detail about the sexual assault she faced, saying in her second tweet regarding the movement that “One guy hunted down my private cell phone number, called when police were here, threatened to shoot me in my front yard. #MeToo.” One aspect to note about Dana Loesch’s participation in the movement is that she has since been a prominent critic of the movement and her initial involvement included a call to action that encouraged women to arm themselves to protect against sexual assault and harassment. Nonetheless, she participated in the movement, and chose to share her personal experience.

The sharing of personal stories helps to create this sense of community, and many tied their stories closely with encouragement for others to share their own stories. Current Vice President Kamala Harris (@KamalaHarris) shared her support for individuals participating in the movement: “To everyone who has come forward with #MeToo, thank you for your courage. To all survivors, know that you are not alone.” Other Twitter users echoed Harris’ declarations that victims of sexual assault and harassment are not alone: “And we are not alone. #metoo” @AdelaideKane and “Also important, if you're a male victim of abuse, you matter too and this chorus of voices is also rising for you. You're not alone. #MeToo” @vinekey.

These tweets showcase the ever-important sense of community that assists with sharing personal stories within a public sphere. If we look at the replies to many of the users who shared their stories, we can see words of encouragement; emphatic apologies for what the user went through; thank yous for participating in the movement; and these much-needed words: “I believe you.” These communities created on Twitter echo previous consciousness-raising movements, as the participants are recognizing, validating, and empathizing with the experiences of others. Looking back at Sowards and Renegar’s framework for consciousness-raising, we see that this sharing of personal narrative fits so closely with the first framework, personal stories. By looking at these individual narratives, we are able to see one vital element to consciousness-raising: individuals gathering together, in this regard in a digital space, to tell their stories and build a community. These personal narratives are what help lead us to social change.

#3: Pervasiveness of the Issues

Many Twitter users chose to discuss the pervasiveness of sexual assault and harassment, often chastising other users for the lack of focus given to the issues prior to the #MeToo movement. The 2017 movement was by no account the first public discussion of sexual assault and sexual harassment. If we solely consider the grassroots stages of consciousness-raising groups, we know these discussions were happening since at least the late 1960s and early 1970s, but personal discussions of these issues have been around for far longer than this Twitter movement. The idea that this movement was the *first* time many individuals had considered the issue of

sexual assault and harassment is asinine; moreover, this movement pushed the issues to the forefront of society and dominated media channels during the latter part of 2017. The issues became inescapable, and bystanders were no longer able to dismiss sexual assault and harassment as a singular issue, and were finally able to recognize these issues as pervasive and systemic.

Individuals who chose to share their support of the movement, but not identify themselves as victims of sexual assault or harassment, used tweets to offer up words of encouragement or the ways in which they hoped to change themselves and/or society. Many of these individuals offered their validation of the victims' experiences, with certain calls to action to protect the victims, categorized as women, in their lives. Actor Jensen Ackles shared his voice to the movement, saying, "For my wife, for my daughters, for all women...I stand with all of you. This has gotta change. #metoo #nomore." While these types of sentiments are inherently important, they rely on the idea that sexual assault and harassment are recent societal issues, rather than longstanding and systemic issues. A lot of tweets, particularly by prominent male Twitter users, appeared to consider this movement the first time they had learned about sexual assault and harassment. Twitter user @TheOperaGeek summarized this sense of reluctance to listen to victims of sexual assault and harassment in their tweet:

To every man "shocked" by all of us posting #MeToo -

We've been telling you for years.
You didn't want to listen.

Do you hear us now?

Sexual assault and harassment have been societal issues for centuries, yet many individuals acted as if they were surprised by the victims sharing their stories. Instead, as @TheOperaGeek says, “[victims have] been telling you for years. You didn’t want to listen.” That is the crux of the issue; for many individuals to listen to victims and take them seriously, the victims’ stories had to be pushed to the forefront of society and dominate the media.

Alongside this, some Twitter users chose to utilize the movement to convey calls to action or a recognition of the significance of the movement. @Amy_Siskind highlighted the gravity of the movement, saying, “I have never seen anything so amazing as what we started today with #MeToo. This is the beginning of a revolution. Strength and compassion.” Tarana Burke herself chimed in, saying that “[#MeToo] is beyond a hashtag. It’s the start of a larger conversation and a movement for radical community healing. Join us. #metoo.”

By analyzing the tweets that include some element of the pervasiveness of sexual assault and harassment, it is easy to see how widespread of an issue this is. This movement was not merely a gathering of a few individuals; it encompassed millions of people across the world, sharing their experiences or acknowledgement of these issues. These tweets above showcase how prevalent the issues are, yet also showcase how little others acknowledge these issues, as well as how little salience was given these issues pre-2017. However, with the popularity of the #MeToo movement, it was impossible to ignore the voices of victims.

Essentially, consciousness-raising is about gathering together and sharing stories, which is often accompanied by the recognition that the issues discussed are

not singular. Millions of individuals were able to share their stories within the #MeToo movement, and entire communities were created to support and assist victims. Through the theme of pervasiveness, we can see, yet again, how personal narratives are vital to the movement; the tweets sharing the pervasiveness of the issues showcase how millions of individuals around the globe have stories of sexual assault and harassment, and that these issues are not individual issues, they are societal issues that need to be addressed and rectified.

#4: Calls to Action

Another prominent theme found within these tweets is the attempt to create social change, whether that meant reframing the movement to focus instead of perpetrators' actions or calls of action to work toward eliminating sexual assault and harassment within our society. We can first look at some of the tweets that sought to reframe the movement to instead focus on the actions of the perpetrators of these issues, rather than leaning so heavily on victims sharing their personal trauma. The hashtags #HimThough and #HimToo arose in response to #MeToo, as users took issue with the victim-focus of #MeToo. By this, I mean that some users disliked that the onus was on the victim to share their personal stories, many of which were incredibly traumatic, and instead wanted to place the responsibility on the perpetrators of such actions. Twitter user @feminsitabulous shared their thoughts on this reframing of the movement: "I'm proud of women for sharing their stories on #MeToo but we need a shift about how we talk about sexual assault so i'm starting #HimThough." Others chimed in, including ShakthiJ who mentioned that

they wanted to “see a #MeToo for men. #MeToo ⁵every time you laugh off a work bro sexualizing a colleague. Me too every time you laugh at rape jokes.” I do, again, want to note the female-focus on this issue, which unfortunately frames the #MeToo movement as men vs. women, rather than a public space for any and all victims of sexual assault or harassment to share their stories and join a community.

By looking at the tweets that attempt to reframe the movement, we see less of a focus on the victims, and more of a focus on the perpetrators of these actions. It is not the victims’ fault, so why do we place the responsibility of sharing upon them? Why is it necessary for victims to share such personal, and, as we have seen, sometimes embarrassing and humiliating stories in order for society to recognize that sexual assault and sexual harassment are huge, monumental issues? These tweets calling for a refocus of the movement want victims to be believed without reliving their trauma, and instead want the perpetrators to take responsibility for their actions.

What this shows us is that, while calls for social change are not always an explicit aspect of consciousness-raising, they certainly can be, and were in the case of the #MeToo movement. Victims were able to share their stories, and as a result, there came calls for action and desires for changes to be made so victims are not forced to share the deeply personal details of their experiences. As well, if we refer back to Sowards and Renegar’s framework for consciousness-raising, we can see that one major component of consciousness-raising is a diversity of opinions and

⁵ I do want to acknowledge the notion of reframing the narrative yet still using the same hashtag. #MeToo was about supporting victims and creating positive communities, and to use the same hashtag is problematic in that it unintentionally seems to celebrate the perpetrators.

experiences, which is seen underneath this theme, as individuals voiced their unique perspectives on the issues. The conversations had in the tweets falling under this theme showcase new ideas and opinions coming to the movement, as well as attempts to ignite larger social change. Challenging the status quo is difficult and sometimes dangerous, yet the individuals within the #MeToo movement addressed the need for perpetrators to take responsibility for their actions without victims sharing profoundly personal experiences. These perspectives are vital to consciousness-raising, and emphasize the necessity of a multitude of viewpoints included in discussions surrounding sexual assault and harassment.

The Absence of Intersectionality:

To accurately discuss and analyze the tweets of the #MeToo movement, we need to understand the term intersectionality. Intersectionality can be defined as the multiple communities an individual identifies with, ranging from gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, nationality, etc. No one is solely one identity, and the ability to recognize the multitudes that exist within a single person is vital to understanding their perspective. In regard to social movements, intersectionality is vital, as it aids in a movement's ability to reach a broader audience. Unfortunately, the movement has been largely criticized for its lack of intersectionality, and its promotion of white, cisgender women as the leaders of the movement (like Alyssa Milano). Current literature critiques the movement for its downfalls and highlights the disparities between vocalizations of women of color and white women, as well as disparities between transfolk and cisgender women.

Dr. Verity Trott, a digital media and feminist activism researcher and lecturer at Monash University, discussed the intersectionality issues within the movement. Unfortunately, white, heterosexual, cisgender women were the focal point of the movement, and thus given the largest platform. Trott explained that “Milano’s original tweet was framed as a call to action for “all the women,” setting the agenda of #MeToo to be about women’s experiences of sexual harassment and assault specifically. This kind of framing excludes the experiences of men, transfolk, and nonbinary folk, with the latter groups experiencing a higher rate of sexual violence” (Trott, 2020). RAINN estimates that an American is sexually assaulted every 73 seconds, and that is not including sexual harassment. These statistics are particularly relevant to people of color and the LGBTQ+ community, as nearly 21% of transgender, genderqueer, or nonconforming college students have experienced sexual assault, and Native Americans “are twice as likely to experience a rape/sexual assault compared to all races.” When gendered language is used, it can detract from the intended message of the piece, and exclude voices that would otherwise be important additions to the movement.

Likewise, the promotion of Milano as the spokesperson of the 2017 #MeToo movement highlights racial discrimination and inequality. Tarana Burke, an African American activist who instigated the usage of “me, too” in regard to sexual assault, received much less media attention than Milano. Trott stated that “it is clear that Tarana Burke is distantly and only loosely connected to the protest network at the beginning of the #MeToo movement. This distance indicates a weakness of connectivity between her and the celebrity feminists who are positioned front and

centre [sic] within the protest network” (Trott, 2020). Various other studies have found that, unfortunately, the movement granted a much larger voice to white participants than to people of color (Leung and Williams, 2019). When people of color are sidelined in movements like this, it makes it more difficult for others to share their experiences and to feel as though it is their place to participate in the movement.

While Alyssa Milano’s tweet gained international attention, there was a lack of acknowledgement given to Burke for spearheading the movement. Milano initially tweeted on Sunday, October 15, 2017, and she did not recognize Burke until Thursday, October 19, 2017, a full four days after the first tweet, and only after receiving criticism from other activists. Of course, this could simply be because Milano was unaware of Burke’s involvement, as the screenshot she included with her initial tweet did not credit Burke either. However, this does highlight the lack of attention given to BIPOC movement participants.

CEO and activist Anna Foster wrote a piece on SWAAY which argues that although women of color were actively involved with the movement, they were rarely heard. Essentially, Foster argues that the #MeToo movement largely discredited the voices of Black women, while simultaneously granting huge platforms to white women: “This #MeToo movement is no different than most historical feminist movements, which contain active racism, and have typically ignored the needs of non-white women even though women of color are more likely to be targets of sexual harassment.” To discuss the #MeToo movement without discussing the women of color who have laid the groundwork for the movement

would be disingenuous and a continuation of the long practice of prioritizing white women over women of color. The truth is, the 2017 #MeToo movement has severe racial inequalities, and the lack of voice given to women of color, and Black women in particular, is incredibly problematic. White women have long since benefitted from the oppression and exploitation of women of color, and this movement was no different (Benard, 2016). Racism and sexism are intrinsically linked, as the patriarchal systems that allow men to be perceived as superior is rooted in white supremacy, and, historically, Black women have been the victim of such sexism and racism. The fact is, women of color are more likely to face sexual assault than white women, yet their assailants are far less likely to face any criminal charges (Catalyst, 2018). The lack of inclusion for Black women in the movement ultimately hindered the intersectionality and affected Black women's ability to participate in the movement in a large way.

Dr. Kaitlynn Mendes, a researcher and professor at the University of Leicester, discussed the limitations some individuals may face in regard to participating in a digital feminist activism space. Like most forms of activism, there are positives and negatives to digital activism, and there are certain practical, emotional, and mental barriers to participating in these formats. Unfortunately, to allow an individual to participate in the 2017 #MeToo movement, which occurred primarily in the digital space, participants had to have access to technology, the internet, and a Twitter account. While many of us may not see the hardship of internet access, approximately 15 - 20 million individuals lack access to reliable internet in the United States alone. This lack of access to the internet certainly

contributed to an individual's physical ability to participate within the movement, as it was one of the few requirements to participate. This severely limits the participation of rural or lower-income individuals within the movement, as they might lack access to reliable internet connection.

Emotionally, respondents also needed to share deeply personal stories or reveal themselves as a victim of sexual assault and/or harassment, opening themselves up to criticism. Mentally, this meant those who chose to share were forced to relive the experience of their sexual assault and/or harassment, and some of those stories were incredibly traumatic to read, much less experience firsthand and then write about. These barriers certainly limited the accessibility of the movement, and thus limited the intersectionality of the movement. Of course, it is difficult to create a social movement that allows every individual equal opportunity to share their experiences, but the #MeToo movement did have an abundance of barriers that prevented individuals from sharing stories that would have added to the movement.

It is important to emphasize that women are not the sole victims of sexual harassment or assault, and one of the main issues within the #MeToo movement is that it was primarily framed as a female-oriented movement, aiding in the exclusion of men and transfolk. Because of this framing issue, many individuals were discouraged from sharing their experiences with sexual assault or harassment, which, unfortunately, devalues the movement. These barriers greatly affected participation, as well as made it easy for critiques to denounce the movement as it left individuals out.

Another intersectionality issue within the movement is the lack of attention given to members of the LBGT+ community. Of course, it is difficult to discern what communities each poster identifies with, especially if they choose not to share those parts of their identity online. However, if we simply focus on tweets that directly refer to members of the LGBTQ+ community, there are very few. Some tweets sought to amend other posters thoughts on the movement, as seen through a tweet by @TheMrMilano, encouraging others to “Protect the transgirls, the sex workers, the runaways, the drug addicts, the lesbians, the strippers, the femmes, the butches #metoo,” in response to another user’s tweet about protecting mothers, sisters, nieces, and daughters. @RaquelWillis_ shared their experience as a member of the LGBTQ+ community:

#MeToo

& more than once.

& just this year.

& before my transition.

& after my transition.

& these are all the words i have for now.

These intersectionality issues cannot and should not be ignored. The movement failed to include a number of individuals, based largely on minority status. When people of color and members of the LGBTQ+ community are not granted as large of a platform as white cishet individuals, it becomes a monumental barrier in participating in the movement. Without a large intersectional component to the movement, it opens it up to mass amounts of criticism (which will be

discussed below), as well as making the movement less effective in producing change, as it only does so for one specific group (in this case, white, cisgender women).

After #MeToo:

As mentioned above, there is an intrinsic vulnerability that accompanies individuals who chose to share their deeply personal stories as part of the movement. These individuals are sharing aspects of their lives that they may have previously never been spoken about, and there was an element of unearthing societal taboos, like sexual harassment in the workplace. That being said, there is also an aspect to participating in the movement that is accompanied by a different level of emotional labor: learning about sexual harassment and assault. This is to say that for some individuals viewing and/or participating in the movement, this was the first time they had been exposed to these stories. On October 16, 2017, the day directly following Milano's tweet, twitter user Benjamin Law (@mrbenjaminlaw) shared his thoughts: "Guys, it's our turn. After yesterday's endless #MeToo stories of women being abused, assaulted and harassed, today we say #HowIWillChange." The tweet amassed almost 3,000 retweets over the past three years, as well as approximately 6,500 likes. Underneath the tweet, Law shared ways in which he will change moving forward, which includes donating to various organizations aiding sexual violence victims, recognizing and removing perpetrators from his life, and utilizing his male privilege for the advocacy for women.

Law faced considerable criticism in the responses to his tweet. Many Twitter users who responded have since deleted their tweets, but from Law's responses, we

can gather that they were attacks against both Law's character and the #MeToo movement in general. Some of the remaining responses highlighted the occurrence of sexual violence against men, and, while that is an incredibly important and valid discussion, bringing it underneath this tweet reads more like a distraction from the discussion surrounding the #MeToo movement than a genuine attempt to include men in the discussion of sexual violence. Herein lies the issue with framing the movement as male perpetrators versus female victims: it opens up the discussion for mass criticism for a failure to address intersectionality. However, not all the responses to Law's tweet were criticism against the movement. Those in favor of Law's tweet echoed calls for change, both systematic and personal.

Law was the first individual to use #HowIWillChange on Twitter, and it is still used to address how bystanders address sexual assault. In direct response to the #MeToo movement, men flooded Twitter with #HowWillIChange, identifying ways in which they will change their behavior, as well as acknowledging the stories shared under the MeToo hashtag. Many Twitter users indicated that they would call-out sexual assault and harassment when they see it, rather than allowing it to continue unchallenged. As well, many tweets mentioned teaching children, specifically young men, the necessity of consent and the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behavior.

However, while Law's tweet is certainly a step in the right direction, we must discuss the context surrounding the tweet. Like mentioned before, the #MeToo movement was by no means the first public discussion of sexual assault and harassment. Victims have been sharing their stories both in private and in public for

years, which makes it interesting to see how many individuals viewed the #MeToo movement as this kind of wake-up call to the inappropriate behavior that runs rampant in society. Law is not alone in his view that the #MeToo movement was an ignition for change, but it does emphasize a commonality across social movements; there are those who directly experience the issue at hand (like racism, sexual violence, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, etc.) and there are those who are privileged enough to learn about the issue secondhand.

We can see a similar parallel in the 2020s, with those who learned about racism online or in school, versus those who learned about racism by experiencing it. There are those privileged enough to learn about racism through books, and there are those who learn about racism through direct lived experience. I do want to note that as a white woman, I am someone who was granted the privilege of learning about racism in school, and I am by no means attempting to compare the centuries of racism to the #MeToo movement. However, parallels can be drawn to the reactions and repercussions of such movements. One of the purposes of social movements is to educate, yes, but the issues social movements are seeking to address and work towards resolving are typically not unknown issues. Racism exists within the United States; this is a fact we have known for centuries. Sexual violence, assault, and harassment are spoken about in length, and pre-2017, there were still large discussions surrounding the issue. The fact is, power was not given to the voices within the movement until it reached such a grand scale.

Criticism the Movement Faced:

I believe that it would be disingenuous to discuss the #MeToo movement without at least briefly touching on the criticism the movement faced. In most social movements, especially in the digital age, criticism is abundant, from legitimate constructive criticism to harsh criticism from those with moral or political differences. The #MeToo movement is no different. Alyssa Milano, participants, and the hashtag as a whole faced adversity as a result of the Twitter movement, which I will be discussing briefly in this section.

Perhaps the largest criticism was directed toward Milano herself, as she became the face of the movement, and it is difficult to remove her from the discussion. Many have taken issue with Milano's actions after the movement, specifically regarding her support of presidential candidate Joe Biden in the face of sexual assault allegations from Tara Reade. The alleged assault occurred in 1993, and gained major media traction in early 2020. When the allegations against Biden surfaced, and with silence from Milano, Twitter users shared their thoughts, encouraging Milano to "shut up" about sexual assault and harassment if she was not going to publicly denounce Biden. Some tweets referenced Milano's earlier tweets including the phrase "Believe All Women," while, to some, it seemed Milano was refusing to believe Reade because of her political affiliations. Eventually, Milano discussed the allegations on her Twitter profile, saying, "#BelieveWomen does not mean everyone gets to accuse anyone of anything and that's that. It means that our societal mindset and default reaction shouldn't be that women are lying." It is important to note that there has been no trial or convictions in regard to these

allegations, but I do not feel as though it is my place to comment on the validity of the accusations. However, the criticism against Milano is relevant to this thesis because it emphasizes a particularly damaging aspect of Milano's celebrity status: Milano has become the face of the movement, so criticism of Milano become criticisms of the movement, and the line of thinking that emerges is that if Milano is not a true ally to sexual assault and harassment victims, then the #MeToo movement was ineffective and insincere. This is the issue of focusing the movement on Milano, rather than the millions of participants who shared their deeply personal experiences. Yes, Milano ignited the 2017 movement, and she has become the celebrity face of the movement, but #MeToo is about the culmination of individuals gathering together to incite change, rather than just about Milano's actions.

Another emergent criticism of the movement was that it somehow made victims, which tweets primarily referred to as women, look weak and fragile. Conservative political figure Candace Owens shared this: "The entire premise of #metoo is that women are stupid, weak & inconsequential. Too stupid to know what men might want if you come to their hotel room late at night. Too weak to turn around and tell someone not to touch your ass again. Too inconsequential to realize this." This perception of the movement is problematic for several reasons, but mainly because it paints sexual assault and harassment as a victim issue, and reaffirms the idea that victims are responsible for preventing the occurrences, which deemphasizes the actions of the perpetrator. We can assume that Owens' is referring to the large scale of victims sharing their stories when she mentions that the #MeToo movement makes individuals look weak or stupid. Owens also

mentioned that the movement turned sexual assault and harassment into trends, which “drowned out the voices of real rape victims.” This line of thinking enhances the idea that rape is the only form of sexual assault that is worthy of recognition, and delegitimizes the experiences of victims. Like mentioned before, there are several reasons why victims choose not to share their stories, and many reasons why a victim might be unable to stop an assault or harassment while it is occurring.

Another prominent criticism of the movement is that it sparked a “witch hunt,” seeking to destroy the reputations of powerful men. Even the authors of “She Said” shared their thoughts on this topic: ‘Were the goals to eliminate sexual harassment, reform the criminal justice system, smash the patriarchy, or flirt without giving offence. Had the reckoning gone too far with innocent men tarnished with less-than-convincing proof, or not far enough, with a frustrating lack of systematic change” (Kantor and Twohey, 2019). Because sexual assault and harassment, historically, have a lack of concrete and substantial evidence (Lisak, et. al., 2010), it is difficult to ascertain whether or not the alleged event actually occurred. This opens up the possibility for false accusations, which according to an Australian study, accounts for only 2.1 percent of sexual assault allegations, making it a much smaller issue than some individuals perpetuate it to be (Murray and Heenan, 2006). In reality, the number of prominent individuals who faced criminal charges after the #MeToo movement are minimal. Only 12 public figures faced conviction or charges, and of those 12, eight had multiple victims come forward (Rummler, 2020). As well, during the #MeToo movement, most individuals were not publicly sharing the names of the perpetrators, and did not formally report the

assault or harassment. So, while yes, false allegations can and do exist, they should not be a deterrent to believing victims. Sharing these stories of sexual assault and harassment are so deeply personal and difficult for so many, and those who choose to share their stories need the support of those around them.

Conclusion:

As the movement occurred in 2017, there is a dearth of concrete data surrounding the movement. It is fairly recent, and as time progresses, there will be many more studies published on the movement. However, we can look at a study that offered concrete data surrounding the movement, and helps us codify whether the #MeToo movement was able to instigate societal change. Researcher Ksenia Keplinger and her colleagues studied the changes in the reporting of sexual harassment in the workplace in a three-year period, with the 2017 #MeToo movement included. The researchers conducted interviews with 21 women in 2018 about their impressions of change during the prior two years. The women perceived that organizations were taking accusations of sexual harassment in the workplace more seriously, and that the women saw changes in their male coworkers' behavior. Unfortunately, the study also found that the women faced hostility from some men in the workplace, which they noted as an unfortunate consequence of the #MeToo movement. They write, "In our sample, 87% of women reported experiencing some type of sexual harassment. Women reported lower mean levels of sexual coercion and unwanted sexual attention in 2018, but a higher mean level of gender harassment compared to in 2016" (Keplinger, et. al, 2019). The article does note

that the study was limited to women, which unfortunately excluded men and transfolk from participating. This study provided data to support that the #MeToo movement was able to affect change within the workplace.

To aid in determining whether or not the 2017 #MeToo movement can be considered a consciousness-raising movement, we can look back at the adapted guidelines from earlier, and discuss whether or not the Twitter movement was able to meet these guidelines.

ADAPTED: All individuals are invited to participate in a consciousness-raising group, unless other criteria is otherwise stated (i.e. a WOC-specific group or a LGBTQ+ group). Individuals of all races, sexualities, genders, ages, and religions are welcome to join.

Does the #MeToo movement fit this criterion? Yes, with caveats. While the usage of twitter allowed all individuals ample opportunity to participate in the movement, white, heterosexual women were promoted to the top of the movement, while minorities were given less salience and prominence within the movement (Modrek and Chakalov, 2019). However, considering that the movement was digital with little physical barriers for participation, I consider this guideline met.

ADAPTED: Speak about your experience on the subject matter (in this case, sexual assault and harassment). Feel free to discuss elements of intersectionality (i.e. the identity factors that contributed to your experience). Use related experience, as needed, but be careful to not stray too far from the main issue.

Does the #MeToo movement fit this criterion? Yes, as users were able to bring up elements that related to their experiences (like their age, sex, and race). These elements of consciousness-raising movements help others to understand the personal experiences of the individual, and heavily relates to the intersectionality of the movement.

ADAPTED: While speaking about personal experiences, do not devalue others'. Classism, racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, ageism, xenophobia, etc. all contribute to an individual's specific experience with sexual assault. Allow speakers to speak freely and openly, without belittling their experiences.

Does the #MeToo movement fit this criterion? Yes and no. There, obviously, was a lot of direct and indirect racism, homophobia, and transphobia included within the movement, as the ignition of the movement itself was co-opted from a Black woman. We cannot ignore these instances of racism, homophobia, and transphobia, as they severely hinder individuals from participating in the movement and affect their willingness to share their stories. However, I will say this guideline is harder to apply to the digital movement, as it is much more difficult to police online behavior than in-person behavior. Because of this, I would not consider meeting this guideline an ultimate marker of whether or not the #MeToo movement can be considered a consciousness-raising group.

Another important discussion to be had surrounding the "success" of the movement is the environment surrounding criminal punishment against perpetrators. According to RAINN, approximately 75% of sexual abuse events go

unreported, and of those that are reported, only 2% of perpetrators serve jailtime. Ultimately, we cannot see the prosecution and incarceration of sexual predators as the benchmark of success for the #MeToo movement, and not as the identifier for whether or not a sexual assault or harassment incident occurred. Because, unfortunately, the system is designed to protect sexual predators and vilify victims, it is incredibly difficult to measure the success of this movement. There needs to be structural change, which cannot be achieved without governmental intervention and societal shift.

Since the #MeToo movement, there have also been subsequent movements seeking to accomplish similar or related goals. #BelieveWomen/ #BelieveSurvivors, which sought to showcase how some survivors of sexual assault and harassment are, unfortunately, not believed., #TimesUp, #NoMoore, in response to the possible election of accused sexual abuser Roy Moore to the Alabama Senate, #IAmVanessaGuillen, in response to the horrific rape and murder of soldier Vanessa Guillén in Fort Hood, Texas. This hashtag helped to uncover mass accounts of sexual misconduct and cover-ups at the military base. These hashtags created other spaces for survivors to share their stories surrounding sexual assault and sexual harassment, but they also show that the #MeToo movement did not magically solve the issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment. These issues still exist within our society, and the erasure of sexual assault and harassment cannot be the test by which the #MeToo movement is judged, as they are issues too big to be rectified by a single movement.

Definitively, the 2017 #MeToo movement meets the updated criteria for a consciousness-raising group. Did it produce social change? Yes, and no. Yes, in that it opened up international discussion surrounding a somewhat taboo topic. No, in that producing social change was not necessary in order to deem this movement to be considered effective. Consciousness-raising can occur without a concrete solution to the issue at hand. When discussing this, I would also like to share a quote from Tarana Burke herself, discussing the movement with The Harvard Gazette:

I think that the media doesn't focus on the trauma that people of color experience. The work that we do in the movement centers on the most marginalized people. And so if you only define the Me Too movement by what you read in the media then no, there is not enough representation or even conversation about how sexual violence affects people of color, queer people, disabled people, anybody who is marginalized. But if you understand that Me Too is not simply what the media has defined it as, it's the work that we are moving forward, then you know that our works start with and centers the most marginalized, including queer and trans people.

The #MeToo movement is more than what the media has written about, and it is more than the tweets that have gained popularity. The movement is about individuals sharing their experiences, it is about communities forming to support victims, it is about the foundational and revolutionary work done by Tarana Burke, with a recognition of Alyssa Milano's work to bring these issues to the forefront of the media. While the movement is certainly not without its issues, it was and is a

consciousness-raising movement, and it showcases how we can utilize social media to create actual change.

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