RHETORICAL STUDIES AND THE #METOO MOVEMENT

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Erin Rebecca Torbett, B.A.

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Erin Rebecca Torbett, B.A.

Thesis Advisor: Lori A. Merish, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes discourse from the social media platform Twitter during the #MeToo movement. This project utilizes feminist rhetorical theory as well as theories of rhetorical ecologies to gain an understanding of the value of Twitter, tweets, and a hashtag that defines a movement. A selection of tweets will be used to uncover the value of many different voices within this social movement. The language of the selected tweets is examined for several reasons: to understand the impact of this movement for sexual assault survivors, to apply rhetorical ecologies studies to the discourse of the #MeToo movement, and to analyze race and class intersectionalities within this movement.

Ecological approaches to discourse studies offers a way to examine elements of a text, or tweet for the purpose of this study, within the context of a larger system. Therefore, through this lens we can avoid separating the tweets from their audience, writers, and the social platform, and focus on the interdependent and interrelated properties of the texts.

In order to effectively complete this analysis, this thesis uses a series of tweets selected from celebrities and non-celebrities who used Twitter from the start of the campaign on October 15, 2017, to more recent tweets in 2018.
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And lastly, to every voice, those who have spoken out and those who haven’t, that has been part of the #MeToo movement, thank you for courage.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Methodology

1.1 Introduction

Statistics show us the number of women who have experienced sexual violence. The National Statistics on Sexual Violence released a series of statistics: One out of four women will experience sexual assault or harassment in their lifetime. One in six women will experience attempted or completed rape at some point in their lives. The victim knows the perpetrator in eight out of ten rape cases.¹ The phrase “cold, hard facts” comes to mind when reading those statistics. That’s all the stats invoke, however. Devastating as they may be, numbers communicate information in a seemingly distant fashion. After all, the women in your life could be the three in four who have not experienced sexual violence. The numbers do not provide any insight into the pain or experiences felt by women—the numbers tell you only that a significant proportion of the female population share similar experiences. While it can be easy to gloss over numbers, stories hold our attention, and can drive home women’s suffering. Numbers are abstract, distancing; stories can be movingly concrete. Women have been sharing their stories about sexual violence for a long time. On October 15, 2017, Alyssa Milano turned to Twitter asking her followers² to reply with two words, “me too,” if they have ever experienced sexual assault or harassment. What followed was a surge of personal stories relating to this singular request.


² Other Twitter users who follow the account that Alyssa Milano has on the website.
My thesis examines the discourse of tweets produced during the first year of the #MeToo movement. Please note, within this thesis I refer to both the #MeToo movement and the Me Too Movement™. When using “#MeToo” I am referring to the Twitter campaign and movement that went viral after October 2017, and when using the “Me Too Movement” I am referencing the movement that was founded in 2006 by Tarana Burke. The language of the selected tweets will be examined for two main purposes in this study: to analyze the rhetorical ecological systems operating within the context of the #MeToo movement and to understand the race and class dynamics of the #MeToo movement.

When Tweeting, women are only given 280 characters to express their pain, shame, anger, loss, victimhood, victim blaming, etc. per tweet. These tweets are a kind of public record that can be studied to understand why women do or do not report their experiences and how women are affected by their individual experiences. The tweets can be studied to understand the power of a collective group working within networks to promote social and political change. Tracing the publically tweeted rhetoric of the #MeToo movement, I examine how the movement’s rhetoric influenced, and has been influenced by, different systems. Chapter two investigates how the #MeToo movement has generated cultural awareness and change by looking at the rhetorical ecologies of tweets produced during the movement’s first year. Chapter three analyzes how counter-rhetorics have shaped and expanded this movement by exploring aspects of race alongside marginalized narratives, power, stereotyping of Black bodies, and claims to victimhood. Examining tweets written with the hashtag #MeToo, this thesis will analyze how written tweets have generated different points of growth and stability for this
movement. Further, applying rhetorical ecology theories to this material offers a better understanding of the broader cultural implications of the #MeToo Twitter campaign.

1.2 A Brief History of Sexual Harassment and Activism

The term “sexual harassment” was first coined by Journalist Lin Farley, who was then teaching at Cornell University, in the mid-1970s after conducting several surveys on workplace experiences with her female students. Through their answers, Farley noticed a trend. Nearly every student had either been forced to quit or been fired from a job because she had rejected sexual advances of a boss. However, the participants were unable to label their experiences because not all of their experiences were “as bad” as rape and therefore, could not be called that. Farley decided then that this phenomenon needed a name. Together with other faculty of Cornell University, Farley originated the term “sexual harassment” and presented this new term and its meanings to the Commission of Human Rights of New York City in 1975. In a 1975 article with The New York Times, Farley is quoted saying, “Sexual harassment of women in their place of employment is extremely widespread. It is literally epidemic.” By naming the problem women were facing, women felt more secure to talk about their experiences. In that same article, five different women in different careers, from waitress to college student, spoke about instances of sexual harassment within their workplaces. Naming the problem

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4 Nemy, 1975.
became a collective experience in this article, but women’s stories of harassment were diverse. That diversity contributed to the difficulty of women participants in the first surveys to name their experiences: Some felt their experiences were not as bad as other women’s; therefore, those experiences could not be in the same category.

Farley conducted her surveys during the second wave of feminism, which occurred during the 1960s to the late 1970s. One of the biggest outcomes of the second wave of feminism was consciousness raising activities.\(^5\) The purpose of consciousness raising within the second wave was to encourage women to share their stories in order to help women, and men, become aware that their experiences were not singular. While the second wave focused more on social change, the first wave of feminism was more dedicated to legal change. The first wave extended from the early 1800s to the 1920s with women fighting for the rights to vote and equal property rights. The late 1980s to early 2000s accounted for the third wave as women worked on equal pay for women, reproductive rights, and ending violence against women.\(^6\) The #MeToo movement is part of what is sometimes called “fourth wave feminism.” This wave marks the continuation of earlier struggles for gender equality paired with social media. This new wave is powered by past feminists’ work on issues such as equal pay and reproductive rights as well as additional concerns like campus rape and workplace discrimination.


As feminism grows into its fourth wave, the term sexual harassment is still very much relevant. It may not produce the same level of affect Farley had likely hoped it would 50 years after she first defined it a key feminist issue. Instead, it has become a common term that women are comfortable using in everyday language. This is important for a conversation to continue. A common term (sexual harassment) paired with a new expression (#MeToo) offers feminists a way to recreate dialogue and change that advances and builds on the work of feminists from the 1970s. The strength and presence of social media for feminist activism has given feminists new environments in which to share their stories, ideas, and opinions to a wider audience—a form of consciousness raising in the fourth wave. Social media sites are digital spaces that virtually connect individuals who are separated geographically. The requirements for joining in the virtual conversations are internet access, use of a smart phone or computer, and availability of an account on one of the many social media platforms. However, a person’s access to social media sites is contingent on the privilege that he or she must also have the means to afford a smart phone/computer as well as internet access, or be able to gain access at a public library. In low-wealth comminutes, this privilege may not be as obtainable. Therefore, this access to or lack of privilege greatly influences who has the convenience to participate within social media activism.

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1.3 Tweets as Literature

This thesis analyzes tweets produced throughout the first year and a half of the #MeToo Twitter campaign. Though the #MeToo movement has expanded outside of social media, this study is originally and primarily focused on the rhetorical discourse that has taken place within Twitter. As a launching point for social activism, Twitter is a relatively new means for building social awareness and generating political and social change. Speaking to the importance of the presence of rhetoric within a social media network, James J. Brown, Jr. claims, “Understanding how writing occupies, how it helps us to reimagine a saturated possibility space, how it helps to create and transform places, can move us toward meaningful change (big or small) by opening the question and by learning how we might variously occupy our saturated, networked lives.”

Users on this social media site are able to compose “tweets” totaling no more than 280 characters. These tweets are then circulated to a user’s “followers,” who can “like,” “retweet,” and “comment” on the original tweet. This form of writing and circulation is an example of the ability to occupy and transform a network through rhetoric.

In essence, Twitter is an overarching digital archive collection and the hashtag is the digital archive identifier. The use of a hashtag defines this new wave of activism—essentially a form of tattooing the cyber-world in which the familiar hashtag is paired with
digital messages.

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8 However, some of the tweets analyzed were produced as a response to conversations outside of Twitter such as print and television networks. These tweets help us examine the synergy between digital and analog mediums within rhetorical ecologies.


10 A month after the #MeToo campaign went viral, Twitter actually increased the number of characters a user could “tweet” from 140 to 280 characters.
with an individual’s specific thoughts and opinions. The purpose of a hashtag is to link social media users together in one conversation. It becomes a searchable tag for all public accounts that have sent a tweet that includes the hashtag. Users are able to search and find tweets that include the hashtag of a conversation they would like to join. Although, because of Twitter’s advanced search features, a hashtag is not the sole archive identifier in a conversation. If a user includes the words of the hashtag without the “#” symbol, the tweet will still populate as part of the searched conversation. However, accounts listed as “private” can also use hashtags but their tweets will not populate in a Twitter search because they are “covered up” by a layer of privacy settings. As users find and interact with the public searchable tweets, though, the original text is then able to be continuously altered. This ever-shifting writing helps “create and sustain networks” of activity surrounding hashtags. Further, this tagging feature in turn allows sites like Twitter to create backlogs of every tweet that included a hashtag as well as the associated Twitter accounts releasing those tweets. Alternatively, hashtags can be deleted, or removed, if a person deletes their tweet or entire account. This hashtag that was once attached to a person’s tweet then becomes removed from the searchable/digital archive collection on Twitter as well. This removal of writing also transforms the digital space.

1.4 Tweet Selection Methodology

In the introduction of Readings in Feminist Rhetorical Theory, editors Karen Foss, Sonja Foss, and Cindy Griffin assert that women “can begin to make more comprehensive and systematic claims about where [they’ve] been, what [they’ve] named

11 Brown, “From Activism to Occupation.”
as important, and how [they’ve] explained [their] place in the world.”

Through the use of social media, women feel more empowered to share their personal stories at an exponentially high rate. As of September 30, 2018, the hashtag “#MeToo” has been used more than 19 million times on Twitter. Therefore, I was unable to realistically read or critically examine every single Tweet released from the beginning of the #MeToo movement. My search of tweets related to the #MeToo movements was largely guided by the results of PEW research conducted in early October 2018. That research marked the peaked time-frames that users were tweeting with the “MeToo” hashtag. In order to help slightly narrow down my research, I decided to mainly look at tweets that had been released during the peak times. These selected dates offer higher rates of circulated writing because more Twitter users were actively participating in real-time with conversations and events that took place online and offline. For example, during the 2018 Oscar Awards, Twitter users were tweeting in response to the conversations taking place on Twitter as well as to the red carpet and acceptance speeches they were watching on television.

However, I have selected a group of tweets to use within this project with a set of principles to ensure ethical rhetorical research. The most important factor being that the participants in the Twitter conversation are prioritized over the data. By this I mean that I


\[14\] Anderson, “How Social Media Users Have Discussed Sexual Harassment since #MeToo Went Viral.”
did not let the number of comments, retweets, and likes dictate whether a tweet should be included within this study. Instead, I included tweets based on the language of the tweet as related to my research. Many might feel that the reach of a single tweet is more important than the tweet itself. However, within my thesis the importance lies in the overall conversation of users on Twitter. Therefore, I rarely refer to the number of likes or retweets a tweet received in order to show its value. Instead, the value of the tweet is shown through an analysis of its rhetorical power. However, the number of comments, likes, and retweets have not been removed from the images of the individual tweets so the reader can take that data into account.

Other principles upheld in my research include an attempt to not misconstrue the basic meaning of the selected tweets and to be mindful of the subject of the tweets and any potential relived trauma that could be produced for readers. Standard guidelines I followed for each chapter’s data set included: The tweets had to contain the hashtag #MeToo; they had to be from a public account; they had to be written by a user I do not know personally; they had to be in English;\(^\text{15}\) they had to be original tweets (not retweets); they had to add to the discourse relative to the chapter they were being utilized for; and they had to mainly be a conversation within Twitter. Each chapter’s set of tweets also had additional aspects added to these guidelines in order to support the research being conducted.

\(^\text{15}\) This is mainly because I only speak and read English. But it is worth noting that there has been tweets from more than 85 countries since the beginning of the movement.
Tweets selected for chapter two of this study were pulled from peak moments of the #MeToo movement from October 15, 2017, to September 30, 2018. Below is a list of the dates and their significances that were used when gathering data.

- October 15 - 21, 2017. After Alyssa Milano’s initial Tweet on October 15, Harvey Weinstein resigned from the board of his entertainment company. More than half a million tweets were generated during this time.\(^{16}\) This time frame was examined because it was the start of the conversation within the movement.

- December 6 - 12, 2017. On December 6, Time magazine named #MeToo activists persons of the year. This re-sparked the conversation.\(^ {17}\) The significance of this time frame showed how powerful this movement could be. After just a month and a half, female activists were being acknowledged for their work involving sexual violence.

- January 7 - 9, 2018. Many celebrities who attended 75\(^{th}\) Annual Golden Globes wore all black to honor victims of sexual assault. Some female actresses also brought activists as their dates.\(^ {18}\) The movement at the Golden Globes during this


time was part of a second effort called #TimeUp that was produced as a result of #MeToo.

- March 8 - 13, 2018. March 8 is International Women’s Day. The conversation around the #MeToo movement arose again with more urgency detected.\(^\text{19}\)

- September 9 - 12, 2018. Former Chairman and CEO of CBS Leslie Moonves resigned after allegations of sexual abuse are brought forward by 6 women.\(^\text{20}\) This event resulted in the highest number of tweets containing #MeToo to be produced in one day. More than 800,000 tweets were seen on September 9, 2018, after news of his resignation was released.\(^\text{21}\)

- September 25 - 30, 2018. Dr. Christine Blasey Ford and Justice Brett Kavanaugh testify in Senate hearing. The outcome of this hearing and the conversations that took place on Twitter during and after are important in showing the influence and restrictions of the #MeToo movement.\(^\text{22}\) The tweets written before, during, and after this hearing also showed that nearly a year later #MeToo was still very much

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\(^{21}\) Anderson, “How Social Media Users Have Discussed Sexual Harassment since #MeToo Went Viral.”

a relevant conversation because they all contributed to creating yet another peak time.

Within each of those time frames, I also followed several guidelines when selecting tweets for chapter two: they had to discuss or add to the conversation of the movement and they had to include topics such as personal narratives, activism, celebrities and political figures, political change, social change.

The purpose of chapter three is to address problematic aspects of race and class within the #MeToo movement. I focus on marginalized groups of women and analyze how their voices have been muted in this Twitter campaign. Therefore, tweets used for chapter three were selected from several results produced from advanced search queries on Twitter. When selecting tweets for this chapter, I followed the same general guidelines as outlined above for chapter two. In addition, for chapter three, the tweets had to reference women of color or working-class women, and if the tweet linked to an article, the Twitter user also had to have original thought paired with the link because I want the examined text to be a conversation within Twitter as much as possible. Additionally, the tweets could be a complete or partial thread23 of tweets from one Twitter user or part of a conversation held on Twitter among several users. This data set was not extracted from a series of particular time frames as the set before. Instead, it was pulled from any time during October 15, 2017, to September 30, 2018. This decision was made because I wanted to ensure that I did not miss important peak times of discourse among women of color that was not recorded within the data from PEW.

23 A series of tweets linked together.
1.5 Challenges of Selections

The vastness of the #MeToo movement on Twitter made this project feel daunting many times. The biggest challenge I faced in this project was attempting to sort through such a large database of tweets and fearing that I would miss important texts that could prove imperative for my work. Early in my research, I debated between doing close readings of selected tweets or distant readings focusing on the use of word clouds and the statistics surrounding the #MeToo campaign on Twitter. However, I was apprehensive of issues surrounding the use of technology to re-produce women’s narratives in limited quantities, such as in the production of word clouds. I was concerned that the use of word clouds would minimize the significance of the overall message. The #MeToo movement was working against the idea of women being limited, or silenced, in this conversation; therefore, I felt my work ultimately would not benefit the women who have spoken out during this movement as best it could if I conducted a narrower approach to studying the discourse. Consequently, once I decided my research would include close readings rather than distant reading, I had to acknowledge that it was impossible for me to read 19 million tweets and that there was a possibility I would miss significant tweets.

Another challenge I faced when gathering tweets was trying to balance the number from celebrities versus non-celebrities. It was clear that celebrity accounts received far more retweets and likes than most non-celebrity accounts. However, I did not want to appear to be removing one set of voices for the purpose of trying to prove or disprove an argument. Two questions I found myself asking a lot were: Does one group’s voice possess more influence than another? Or is it the collection of groups’ voices that have
the powerful effect? In the end, I decided I want this research to focus on the power of collective groups’ voices that influence change and awareness.

The last challenge I faced was when I was deciding which issues the #MeToo campaign missed the mark on to include in this thesis. The #MeToo campaign has had its fair share of problematic issues, such as marginalizing groups of people who have experienced sexual harassment (the LGBTQ community, women of color, working- and middle-class women, men) but are not white, upper class women, or a female #MeToo leader being accused of sexually assaulting someone after claiming to be sexually assaulted.24 And these two examples only scratch the surface. However, throughout the history of feminist activism, women of color’s voices have often been silenced. A Black female activist originally founded the Me Too Movement specifically advocating for girls and women of color in low wealth communities. “#MeToo” became a viral force following a white, upper-class woman’s two-word tweet. Therefore, because of the history of marginalized voices within feminist campaigns and the background of the Me Too Movement, it seemed fitting that this study look explicitly at the race and class aspects of the #MeToo movement within an online network such as Twitter.

24 Asia Argento was one of the first women to accuse Harvey Weinstein of assault and was then later accused of sexually assaulting Jimmy Bennett when he was 17 and she 37. Argento denied the accusation.


Chapter Two: Rhetorical Ecologies of the #MeToo Movement

2.1 Introduction

Three days after Alyssa Milano sent the tweet that became the sounding call for the #MeToo movement, Canadian singer-songwriter Jann Arden sent the above tweet. While it is improbable she knew exactly the extent of the “wave” that would be coming, she felt the potential power that might come with this sudden flooding of tweets paired with the words “me too.” Arden was aware that connections would be fostered through this movement. Arden’s sense of “[a] gathering” is a common theme within feminism. In “Feminist Rhetorical Practices,” Gesa E. Kirsch and Jacqueline J. Royster define social circulation as “connections among past, present, and future in the sense that the overlapping social circles in which women travel, live, and work are carried on or modified from one generation to the next and give rise to changed rhetorical practices.”

Twitter became the social space in which women “have functioned and continue to function as rhetorical agents and audiences” in order to provide a glimpse into the

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challenges of women’s lives. By establishing the discourse within the #MeToo movement, women were able to use Twitter individually and, when paired with millions of voices, collectively as a group. They were able to establish rhetorical agency and spark social change. This “social circle” of women participating in the movement’s discourse are bound by the stamp “#MeToo” within a social network. Women are able to generate a new narrative surrounding sexual harassment and assault through the circulations of their personal stories. Through the circulation and accumulation of writing inside, and outside, of this social media network, discourse enables other discourse and can help define the identity of the collective group participating in the discourse. In important ways, #MeToo adapted the second wave feminist tactic of “consciousness raising” to the digital age, promoting a collective discourse to shed light on problems of sexual assault and harassment.  

The rhetors participating in this movement ask readers to become consciously aware of how prevalent sexual harassment is in the lives of women. In order to understand how the systems of text, writer, audience, and context work together to build awareness within the #MeToo movement, a rhetorical ecologies approach will be utilized.  

Ecological approaches to discourse analysis offer a way to examine elements of a text, or tweets for the purpose of this study, within the context of a larger system. Therefore, through this lens we can avoid separating the tweets from their audience,


writers, and social platform and focus on the interdependent and interrelated properties of the texts.  

30 The authors of “The Importance of Harmony: An Ecological Metaphor for Writing Research” explain that it is through interdependent writing systems that environments create and are changed.  

31 “Writing consists of a complex web of ideas, purposes, interpersonal interactions, cultural norms, and textual forms...[Writing] is less about individual elements...and more a narrative of interactions intrinsic to a system.”  

32 The #MeToo movement emerged on Twitter as an interdependent writing system among women who have experienced sexual harassment or assault, a dynamic system that invited and enabled more and more women to add their voices to the narrative. And as the movement grew, the discourse surrounding the movement began to materialize into a conversation that cited the need for social change.

Recent work in rhetoric and composition studies on the “social turn” can help illuminate the social significance and efficacy of tweets in the MeToo movement. In “Writing Material,” Laura R. Micciche writes about the complexity of “social turn” saying:

The social turn configured writing as a mode for social action—a tool for enacting agency and, quite often, change on a large and small scale. Writing also became a tool for expressing cultural identities, developing awareness of experience as both


32 Fleckenstein, “The Importance of Harmony,” 392-393.
personal and collective, and joining a conversation that does not begin or end with a single individual.\textsuperscript{33}

Applying these ideas of interdependence, agency, and “social turn” to a group of selected tweets (writing), this chapter will analyze how the MeToo movement rhetoric curated a new identity, narrative, and community around sexual harassment and assault to produce social and political change.

I have found Jenny Edbauer’s theoretical framework for rhetorical ecologies to be most helpful in understanding these relationships between rhetorical practices and social influence. Edbauer explains rhetorical ecologies as complex systems that are ever changing due to fluidity, intensity, and reliance on viral aspects within an environment. “The intensity, force, and circulatory range of a rhetoric are always expanding through the mutations and new exposures attached to that given rhetoric, much like a virus.”\textsuperscript{34} Therefore, to understand the discourse on Twitter, the environments surrounding the #MeToo movement must be examined alongside the conversation. This chapter explores the main “systems” of the social and political environments of the United States as well as the digital network Twitter. Edbauer describes the relationship of influence between rhetoric and systems saying, “...a rhetoric emerges already infected by the viral intensities


that are circulating in the social field.” This chapter will also analyze several “viral” factors or forces that helped shape the context of this movement.

2.2 The Tipping Point for the Social Turn

Sharing stories of sexual assault and harassment is not a trend specific to the social media era. However, social media has given many more—indeed, millions of women the opportunity to have their voices heard. In his book The Tipping Point, Malcolm Gladwell describes a tipping point as a moment when “[i]deas and products and messages and behaviors spread just like viruses do” in order to “start and control [cultural] epidemics.” However, he notes that certain conditions must be in place within a community before this social “contagion” is possible. Though many people have correctly expressed that work was being done on sexual violence before the #MeToo movement started, Milano’s initial tweet generated the tipping point in the epidemic of sexual harassment and assault awareness. However, the conditions that were in place at the same time of Milano’s tweet helped forge this movement.

Before Milano’s tweet, Ashley Judd and Rose McGowan, along with a group of 30 other women, had accused Harvey Weinstein of sexual harassment and assault. The New York Times first reported that Weinstein had “paid off sexual harassment accusers


37 Gladwell, The Tipping Point, 85.
for decades” on October 5, 2017. Five days later, more than 30 women had come forward to share their stories with different news outlets—which The New York Times compiled into one article. The article’s goal was to highlight the fact that Harvey Weinstein was a serial harasser. This article was published in print and online, and was tweeted by The New York Times’ Twitter account. In the hopes of showing the widespread extent of the problem, Milano sent the tweet that would publicly launch this movement by inviting others to state whether they have experienced sexual assault or harassment before. Milano woke up to 55,000 replies to her original tweet and the hashtag “MeToo” was trending number one worldwide. This tweet from Milano started out as a request for acknowledgment of shared experience but soon grew into a form of “social action” because of the growing discourse on Twitter. While Milano’s tweet was a response to a conversation made public through a print magazine that was circulated both offline and online, it became a “tipping point” after it “went viral” and spread quickly overnight. As Twitter users began to respond to Milano’s tweet, Twitter’s algorithm also picked up on the presence of a new conversation and generated the Twitter Trend


“#MeToo,” a feature that will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Each one of these conditions outlined above had an impact on the emergence of this movement.

Within a few days of the #MeToo Twitter campaign, millions of women joined in the conversation with the hopes of spreading awareness, promoting social and, potentially, legal change, and, ultimately, putting an end to sexual harassment and violence against women. Some women simply replied to Milano’s original tweet with the words “me too” and others replied offering specific accounts of #MeToo incidents they had experienced. As the momentum continued to grow, users began to address other issues involving sexual harassment and assault, for example, reasons why women do not speak out. Author Cheryl Strayed took to Twitter to express solidarity with other women in the tweet below:

![Cheryl Strayed’s Tweet](image)

This tweet reveals the repression women have felt concerning speaking about sexual violence. The text exposes that women (“we”) have always (“from the beginning”) shared this experience (“BEYOND knew”)—and explains why more women did not share their stories before (“we were told...this is how the plot was meant to go”). She cites “revision” as the reason women are reporting harassers and sharing their stories on digital networks. This idea of “revision” exemplifies the fact that issues usually have a
way of resurfacing if the problem is not resolved. The juxtaposition of resurgence and social activism here suggests that the issue of sexual assault and harassment was an almost contagious presence that would emerge within feminism again because it has been an undeniable, ongoing problem within society.

“Me Too” is a short, inclusive, vague phrase that sparks curiosity. When Milano connected this phrase to sexual harassment and assault, it became a tipping point for this movement to begin circulating narratives and building a community of supporters. The epidemic of sexual harassment and assault needed a viral host to link to before it could develop the necessary rhetoric. Furthermore, this epidemic needed the help of rhetors to continuously support its viral nature. As the phrase “me too” developed into a hashtag, the community of people discussing the topic of sexual harassment and assault persistently grew through shared experiences and feelings of solidarity.

2.3 Environment Influences on #MeToo

The political environment after the 2016 election, a previously formed foundation, and the social media site Twitter gave the #MeToo movement rhetors the empowerment they needed to continue pushing forward. At the start of the #MeToo movement, the culture of the United States was at a low point, especially for women. A sitting president who openly bragged about harassing women and encouraged his followers to do the same created a toxic environment. In “Writing Ecologies, Rhetorical Epidemics,” Kristen Seas

41 I know that Milano was not the first person to link the phrase “me too” to sexual assault; however, her doing so at the moment she did sparked a worldwide response. Credit for this phrase linked to sexual assault goes to Tarana Burke, the founder of the MeToo Movement, and in chapter 3 of this thesis I explore that aspect of the story in more detail.
explains ways in which toxic environments can produce chaos or alter the behaviors of people living in the environment. “[E]nvironmental contexts help to define expectations of behavior—or at least perceived expectations—and can dramatically change the ways in which people process information and thus how they will act.”

Many women felt betrayed that the leader of the US is tremendously condescending toward and depreciates women, and that he could still be elected into the White House. Twitter user, Wize Old Owl, points out the environment in place leading up to the start of the #MeToo movement saying, “women are so outraged that Trump was elected after ADMITTING to sexual assault.”

Figure 3. Wize Old Owl’s Tweet.

This tweet from Wize Old Owl was written shortly after President Trump was accused of sexual misconduct by nearly 20 women and was named runner-up to the Time’s 2017 Person of the Year. This reference to the cultural environment shows how the force of one participant’s rhetoric can impact an audience. Trump’s crass language concerning


43 The winner of the Time’s 2017 Person of the Year was “The Silence Breakers,” women and men of the #MeToo movement.
sexual harassment and his demeaning and bullying of female politicians, such as Hillary Clinton and Elizabeth Warren, paired with the fact that he still received enough Americans’ support to win the election triggered rage, conscious and unconscious, within many women who had experienced sexual violence. This is an example of how “actions of the participant create in part the environment that, in turn, creates the [counter-]participant” and counter-environment.\textsuperscript{44} Environmental influence shapes a person. To limit the negative influence of a toxic environment, communicators can “make alterations to material contexts”—such as with the language of the #MeToo movement.\textsuperscript{45}

Additionally, there were other factors in place that allowed the #MeToo movement to take shape quickly. The Me Too Movement was actually started by activist Tarana Burke in 2006.\textsuperscript{46} The foundation was already in place; the “MeToo” narrative had been developed and the identity of the movement was established. This allowed for a greater circulation of texts because participants were able to focus solely on the rhetoric of the movement. Participants of the movements did not have to worry about creating a new organization that would address the needs of women sharing their stories. Burke’s original MeToo movement was able to unite with Twitter’s viral #MeToo movement as soon as the need arose. The act of “revision,” as Cheryl Strayed described above, creates a more public Me Too Movement that can, in turn, work to provide more resources to those in need. This viral nature creates more exposure for the organization. With more

\textsuperscript{44} Fleckenstein, “The Importance of Harmony,” 393.

\textsuperscript{45} Seas, “Writing Ecologies, Rhetorical Epidemics,” 59.

coverage, the Me Too Movement is able to find funding for resources more readily. They are also able to find more volunteers to help with their organization and, therefore, able to reach more people. This continues the discourse and work of the movement in offline networks and that can be then be recirculated in online networks as updates.  

Further, Twitter’s social platform offers an environment that can create a mode of hyper-visibility for discourse. First, as I mentioned above, Twitter’s algorithm identified “#MeToo” as a Twitter Trend. A Twitter Trend helps target and amplify a conversation taking place on Twitter that might be relevant or of interest to a user. The network has an algorithm in place that detects these conversations. Twitter explains it algorithm: “Twitter Trends are automatically generated by an algorithm that attempts to identify topics that are being talked about more right now than they were previously. The Trends list is designed to help people discover the ‘most breaking’ breaking news from across the world, in real-time."  

Creating a Twitter Trend for #MeToo allowed for greater visibility of the conversation. Trends usually only last a few hours or days, and can resurface later if they become popular, again—but with a new group of people. This helps ensure that a Trend is a conversation many other users might be interested in rather than just the same conversation by existing users. Users are able to click on a Twitter Trend and see related tweets, which they can then interact with by liking, retweeting, or commenting on.

This interaction moves to a second feature of Twitter’s environment that helps create discourse visibility. Tweets circulate across what is known as a user’s Twitter

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47 I further discuss the Me Too organization created by Me Too Movement™ founder Tarana Burke in chapter 3.

A user’s Twitter feed can include retweets and likes from an account they do not follow, if an account they do follow completes either of the action of retweeting or liking a tweet. For example, if user A likes or retweets user B, and user B’s account is open to the public, and user C follows user A, then user B’s tweet will show up in user B’s Twitter feed even though user B does not follow user C. As more Twitter users like and retweet a tweet, Twitter’s visibility system maximizes user B’s tweet which can influence a larger audience. This movement of retweets and likes of one user (user A) to their followers (user C) helps circulate texts across more individuals’ Twitter feeds. Likewise, retweets and likes are an act of affirmation by users. Additionally, with a retweet a user can add text to the original tweet.

These features, Twitter Trends and Twitter feeds, allow users to transform or expand on another participants’ narratives or ideas. As long as the tweet exists, the text can constantly be circulated and transformed to impact audiences. Moreover, the audience reading these tweets is also invited to join the conversation. This interrelationship between algorithm, reader, and writer helps build active communities. As more people participated in the conversation in this online network, the visibility and circulation of the topic continued to grow in a short time.

Each of these environmental factors has helped shaped the rhetoric, and vice versa, of the #MeToo movement. In this example, rhetoric has worked both with and against environments to influence social networks as well as to establish the conditions for circulation and emergence. The relationships between Twitter users and acts of

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49 Ongoing stream of tweets from accounts the Twitter user is following.
rhetoric must then be examined to appreciate how this discourse has materialized within these environments.

2.4 Interdependence within #MeToo

As the #MeToo Twitter campaign fostered a viral emergence, its existence continued to develop based on the relationships and interdependence of people. As Seas perfectly sums up, “By definition, epidemics cannot happen without people.”\(^{50}\) The network of people involved with the #MeToo campaign grew quickly and ranged from high-profile celebrities like actresses to political leaders to athletes to ordinary people. As “me too” tweets circulated, stories began to emerge from those original two words. Discourse was used to describe how, why, and what change is needed. Central to feminist social media activism is the idea of affect. Prudence Chamberlain describes this use of affect as “creating a specific form of public feeling that sustains itself for a limited period of time.”\(^{51}\) Affective rhetoric within the #MeToo network has had an impact on readers, respondents, and communities. Seas describes the three types of people needed to help sustain these networks based on Gladwell observes three types of people needed to help sustain these networks of social action: (1) “those who provide the social glue (connectors),” (2) “those who supply the knowledge the people need (mavens),” and (3) those who have the skills to persuade others in the network to change (salespeople).”\(^{52}\)

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\(^{50}\) Seas, “Writing Ecologies, Rhetorical Epidemics,” 60.


\(^{52}\) Seas, “Writing Ecologies, Rhetorical Epidemics,” 60.
Each of these groups in a network are interdependent and some individuals can move interchangeably between positions.

For the #MeToo network, the connectors include any person who shared the hashtag or their personal stories. Twitter user Carini Gambarini\(^53\) points out that everyday people are the “trendsetters,” not Hollywood. Her tweet reminds users that it is their work and ideals that “shape the cultural conversation” that Hollywood then reflects back to the public.

Gambarini’s tweet links everyday people as connectors to the #MeToo movement. Everyone who tweeted #MeToo became connected to each other—even though most did not know one another. However, users’ testimony of shared sexual assault and harassment experiences ties them together to create a larger network of connectors. The connections they forge can influence how rapidly and widely the “epidemic” is spread.

\(^{53}\) For this Twitter user, I am using her Twitter handle, the name after the @ symbol, rather than the name she has list on her profile mainly for the reason that her Twitter handle is much shorter than her name.
A tweet from journalist Louise McSharry highlights how connectors are critical for extending ideas. She writes that she is overhearing a conversation about rape culture and #MeToo. She notes that she is “really really glad these conversations are happening.”

![Figure 5. Louise McSharry’s Tweet.](image)

The two young women, the connectors in this tweet, have formed a smaller network to expand on ideas of the larger network. Their word-of-month discourse about the epidemic of sexual violence materializes the work being done on social media to in-person social settings. This is important for the #MeToo movement because the discourse cannot solely live online if social change will ever take place. Social media helps facilitate connections among people who might never have met without discovering a shared experience through a digital network. This online space also offers a way for people to learn about events, such as #MeToo protests, happening in nearby areas. These connections that are established within social media to the real world offer people ways to expand their community with individuals who have similar experiences. Therefore, the interdependence of social media and the real world is equally important to the work of sustaining the viral nature of movements.

While McSharry’s tweet describes two women able to openly talk about “rape culture,” not everyone involved with the #MeToo movement has felt comfortable
speaking out. Many women who have had experiences of sexual assault or harassment have not spoken, and some might never speak out. In order to acknowledge this reality, *Time* magazine included an individual arm in the frame of the front cover of their Persons of Year issue.\(^{54}\) This represents how some women would rather remain anonymous within this movement by either not sharing their stories or being named anonymous if they do share. Freelance producer and correspondent Alex Berg highlights this in her tweet identifying the arm as a “moving symbol for all women who can’t come forward.”

![Figure 6. Alex Berg’s Tweet.](image)

A combination of the writers of the *Time* article and “the arm” represent mavens of the #MeToo movement. The article’s writers are working to educate an audience through the stories of survivors of sexual assault. Secondly, “the arm” or people who decide to remain anonymous can educate people through their silence. They are a reminder that some people cannot come forward because their #MeToo experiences are too painful to discuss, expressing them could cause them to lose their jobs, or it could even endanger their lives.

Moving now to those individuals Gladwell denominates the “salespeople,” most might agree that these are the high-profile celebrities who have shown the positive effects of saying “me too.” Though their privilege has a great deal to do with the fact that

\(^{54}\) Zacharek, “TIME Person of the Year 2017: The Silence Breakers.”
powerful men have been removed from Hollywood, their willingness to speak up is empowering and hopeful. During the 2018 Golden Globes, Oprah Winfrey delivered a show stopping acceptance speech for the Cecil B. de Mille Award. She is quoted below in a retweet from Canadian lawyer Mélanie Joly saying, “I want all girls watching her now to know, that a new day is on the horizon.”

Mélanie Joly 🌟@melaniejoly · 7 Jan 2018
The #MeToo movement is not just a moment in time, it is a call to action, a fundamental change in our culture. To all the inspiring women who have led it and those who have embraced it, thank you. Together, we will ensure equality and diversity continue to strengthen our society.

Figure 7. Mélanie Joly’s Tweet.

Oprah’s speech oozes hope and great expectations for the #MeToo movement. Her speech encourages others to get involved with the #MeToo movement in order to ensure “girls watching” do not have experience sexual violence or feel shamed or afraid to report any incident. Mélanie Joly’s added text to the retweet exemplifies this notion. She states that this movement is “a call to action, a fundamental change in our culture.” Oprah’s speech “sold” her to continue working within this movement. Joly claims that “together, we [women who have led the movement and those who have embraced it] will ensure” change within culture. This rhetorical performance for the #MeToo movement
helped circulate a new conversation on Twitter—one that looks toward future
generations. Again, this was a tweet that was in response to a conversation happening
down. Oprah’s speech was then circulated online in the form of a video clip or quote
after reaching those who were watching to the award show live or keeping up-to-date on
Twitter.

Acknowledging the importance and different roles of people in relation to
rhetorical ecologies, allows for an understanding of how discourse can be influenced and
impact cultural environments. Social networks are necessary in order for cultural
epidemics to go viral. Without a host of people influencing the discourse around cultural
problems, the less likely a tipping point is created to virally address the issue.

2.5 Conclusion

Originating from a single tweet on a social media platform, the #MeToo Twitter
campaign has become a “network of lived [cultural] consciousness and structures of
feelings.”55 This chapter examined an affective ecology that encompasses significant
experiences and feelings within social places. Using a rhetorical ecologies approach, the
chapter analyzes the complex system of acts of rhetoric on Twitter in the MeToo
movement, the scale of the tragedy surrounding the issue of sexual harassment and
assault, the way a single tweet can engender a “tipping point,” and the complex, dynamic
interrelations between the rhetorical environment that impacts rhetoric and the people
who produce the discourse.

Chapter 3: Race and Class Relationships within the #MeToo Twitter Campaign

3.1 Introduction

One of the most problematic issues surrounding the viral #MeToo Twitter campaign has been its relation to women of color. On October 15, 2017, Alyssa Milano tweeted, “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet.” Through replies and re-tweets, this initial tweet showed how common sexual violence is toward women and gained such a large following and response that this moment was quickly named “#MeToo.” The media gave credit to Milano before she learned where the phrase “me too” originated and gave due credit. The #MeToo campaign’s beginning traces back to 1997 after African-American activist Tarana Burke listened to the story of a young girl who was repeatedly sexually abused by a family member. Burke has said in numerous interviews that the phrase “me too” came to her mind as she listened to this girl. Years later, in 2007, she started the organization Just Be Inc. that helps victims of sexual assault and abuse. It was then that she coined the term the “Me Too Movement™” within her organization. Burke believed these two small words, “me too,” would allow survivors to find comfort and empowerment in knowing that they are not alone and can be freed from any shame that they may feel. While this

56 Milano tweeted the next day saying, “I was just made aware of an earlier #MeToo movement, and the origin story is equal parts heartbreaking and inspiring,” with a link to Burke’s organization. It is unclear who informed Milano that #MeToo was already a movement.

phrase has taken on significant meaning for many survivors of sexual violence, Burke’s organization and her Me Too Movement were originally developed with women of color in mind.

As I review selected tweets expressing matters of marginalization and silencing, I analyze how the texts show that women of color identify with the movement differently. The selected tweets explore the social structures and attitudes that are directed toward neglected groups of women concerning sexual violence and how this has caused their voices to be excluded within this movement. What emerges, however, from these voices is what rhetorical theorists call a “counter-rhetoric” that increases the discourse of the #MeToo movement. Returning to rhetorical ecologies theory, Jenny Edbauer writes about the influence and importance of counter-rhetoric within movements: “Not only do these counter-rhetorics directly respond to and resist the original exigence, they also expand the lived experience of the original rhetorics by adding to them—even while changing and expanding their shape.”58 This concept of “counter-rhetoric” can be used to understand how women of color have been able to extend and challenge discourse as a minority group during the #MeToo Twitter campaign. Additionally, in the field of Communications Studies, Edwin and Shirley Ardener’s “Muted Group Theory” examines how marginalized groups are excluded from a conversation.59 The Ardeners theorize that “not all speakers are equally served by their language since not all speakers are equal


contributors to formulating the language.”\textsuperscript{60} Communications Studies scholar Cheris Kramarae has previously applied muted group theory to relationships between women and men.\textsuperscript{61} However, this theory can be applied to groups of women. To apply these theories to Me Too, the tweets selected\textsuperscript{62} will actively identify groups of women regularly disregarded in conversations of sexual violence. Focusing again on Twitter discourse, this chapter will examine the intersectionalities of race and gender alongside disregarded narratives, power, media’s stereotypes, and claims to victimhood. The analysis of the selected tweets will show how and why Black and lower-class women have become a counter-public of rhetors during this movement.

3.2 Becoming A Counter-Public

Despite Burke’s personal emphasis on women of color, the #MeToo Twitter campaign has, however inadvertently, perpetuated the silence of women of color since it has been largely dominated by white, upper/middle class women. In the Twitter campaign’s initial hours, Milano was cited as its creator because of her tweet. This


\textsuperscript{62} Tweets used in this chapter were selected from results of an advanced search query on Twitter. Regulations around my selection included: The tweets had to contain the hashtag #MeToo and reference women of color. The tweets could not be a quote from another source. They could not include a link to article because I wanted the conversation to take place within Twitter.
marginalization can be seen to exemplify what bell hooks and other scholars identify as the broader marginalization of African-American women’s contributions and experiences within the history of the feminist movement. In the preface of *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks writes, “To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body.” By crediting Milano with the creation of “#MeToo,” Burke was immediately pushed to the margins at the inception of the Twitter movement. And that was not the last time Burke would be denied the credit many feel she deserves.

Author Tiffany D. Jackson is questioning why MeToo founder Tarana Burke was excluded from Time magazine’s cover image of the 2017 Persons of the Year. Time magazine named “The Silence Breakers” as the 2017 Persons of the Year for their courage to speak up against their sexual harassers. The front cover included actress Ashley Judd, singer Taylor Swift, former Uber engineer Susan Fowler, lobbyist Adama Iwu, Isabel Pascual, an immigrant from Mexico whose name was changed to protect her

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64 Zacharek, “TIME Person of the Year 2017: The Silence Breakers.”
identity, and the arm of a sixth anonymous woman.65 Though Burke was featured inside the magazine with the article on “The Silence Breaker,” Jackson’s tweet is alluding to the fact that Burke was pushed outside of the margins of the magazine cover. Jackson also points out that the weight of a woman’s voice depends on the color of their skin. She writes, “…a white woman’s whimper is deemed louder than a black woman’s scream.”

Many other women of color have used Twitter to express how their voices have been silenced. As more survivors began to share their stories through Twitter, blog posts, interviews, and other social media outlets, a narrative about types of sexual harassment and assault became prevalent.

Twitter user Deesha Dyer, former White House Social Secretary for President Barack Obama, notes that the narrative was missing the voices and experiences of Black women. bell hooks explains the reasons why discourse around a topic such as Me Too may not result in shared narrative. She says, “...race and class identity creates differences in the quality of life, social status, and lifestyle that take precedence over the common

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experience women share—differences which rarely transcend.” Deesha’s tweet highlights how this movement has been more successful for sharing white, upper-class narratives over African-American and lower-class ones. Experiences that would be helpful for “little black girls” to hear, and understand that such are not normal, are “visibly absent” from this movement. By neglecting to include narratives such as the ones that involve women having “to deal with that Uncle or cousin,” Black women are excluded from this conversation. The power of the language from white, cisgender females became the prevailing discourse for shared stories of harassment and assault within the #MeToo movement. The stories that should be heard and included from women of color have been silenced, and their experiences not represented. Consequently, Deesha recognizes that Black women’s experiences are mainly nonexistent in this movement and feels that she must apologize to younger generations for this lack of recognition. Similarly, another Twitter user also complains that the #MeToo movement has been reluctant to include diverse stories for “the women who need [the work of this movement] most.”

66 hooks, From Margin to Center, 4.


68 Cathy Park Hong, Twitter, January 14, 2018, 8:25 PM. https://twitter.com/cathyparkhong/status/952713209361960966.
This tweet from Cathy Park Hong asks for more relatable stories to be included in the conversations around #MeToo. Hong wrote this tweet three months after Milano’s initial tweet. She notes that the #MeToo movement is “not expanding” to include additional narratives with which more women can identify. She addresses who should be included in the narrative, “vulnerable low-income black and brown women,” highlights the specific types of experiences that these women face, “workplace sexual harassment,” and claims that it is these women who need the strength and empowerment of this Twitter movement. Again, this communicates the imbalance of experiences heard within the movement. By not actively expanding the #MeToo Twitter campaign to include various narratives, its leaders have developed “separate realities” and assumed “control of dominant discourses” of lived sexual harassment and assault instances. These tweets highlight the fact that women of color, and their stories, have been excluded from the #MeToo conversation.

Moreover, these tweets begin to show why a counter-rhetoric is essential for this movement. By resisting the ideas that the #MeToo is doing things differently—is more inclusive and “intersectional”—than second wave feminism, these women acknowledge the need for additional narratives that will expand the movement and better define shared

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69 Ardener, “Ardener's ‘Muted Groups.’”
experiences. Accordingly, these following tweets will explore factors that influence the creation of counter-publics.

### 3.3. Power as Contingency of Agency

The theorization of agency within rhetorical ecology studies suggests that author, audience, technologies, and environments all partake in effecting agency. In the article “Agential Matters,” Laurie Gries writes about the relationship of agency within rhetorical ecologies, “Rhetorical agency emerges from this dynamic extended activity of intra-action between human and non-human, virtual and actual, historical and contemporary entities.”

As women began to share their experiences of sexual assault and harassment, women of color highlighted the lack of agency their narratives held within the discourse.

These three tweets below from a thread by Crystal Marie Fleming were written during the very start of the Twitter movement. The combination of these tweets together clearly reflects the experiences of minority women in feminist movements. These tweets were written just two days after Milano consulted Twitter for additional stories of sexual abuse and assault. Fleming notes that this movement’s momentum only took off because a white celebrity called for action. Additionally, she highlights that it is “power” associated with the white women’s claims that resulted in an initial surge of response from others. This power effects the rhetorical agency of each group.

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Furthermore, Fleming indicates that marginalized women are dismissed, ignored, and neglected when they attempt to speak about their sexually violent experiences. By doing so, she is offering an alternative narrative within the #MeToo movement. It is one not typically identified with upper class white women and celebrities. Though women from all races and economic situations have been subjected to sexual abuse or assault, their voices are not equally heard inside or outside of MeToo. These tweets show that women of color and working-class women do not feel their voices have the same agency as white women; instead, “no one cares.” These tweets begin to explain the historical social structures and attitudes that have been in place toward a neglected group of women concerning sexual violence. Fleming cites wealth and power as needed factors for change or believability. And because, historically, women of color have lacked economic privilege and power, their voices become muted in this movement.

Fleming’s tweet actively identifies a group of women regularly disregarded in conversations about sexual violence as well as points to “power” as a requirement for
gaining agency within this movement. Due to the fact that white wealthy women and celebrities are equipped with this “necessary” feature, a single (white upper-class women’s) narrative emerged from the #MeToo movement while experiences from women of color were pushed aside. White celebrities became the face of the #MeToo movement; they thus became the dominant group in the movement, profoundly shaping the conversation surrounding sexual abuse and assault experiences. Marginalized groups of women became the subordinate group and their voice was not seen as valuable. 71

In response to a tweet quoting U.S. Representative Jim Clyburn, a South Carolina Democrat, saying that he did not believe allegations made against U.S. Rep. John Conyers because “all the complaining women were white,”72 Twitter user DREW stepped in to explain why there might not be claims from women of color. She notes lack of power and vulnerability as reasons why Black women might have spoken out against Conyers.


However, without context of Clyburn’s statement, DREW’s tweet implies that these are collective feelings among women of color with the use of the word “we.” DREW is not speaking solely for herself through this tweet. Instead, by referencing “we,” which represents the “black women” DREW first referenced, she is using this social site to speak on behalf of other women with which she identifies. This tweet is significant because it addresses the lack of agency felt by marginalized groups of women. DREW emphasizes that Black women are victims of sexual assault but are still hesitant to speak out. Her tweet is also noteworthy because she cites the #MeToo movement as still not enough for many Black women to feel comfortable sharing their own stories. As a movement that is meant to empower women, this tweet recognizes that only a small number of women can access that power. This again speaks to the ways women of color have been hushed during this movement that was originally created for them.

Figure 12. Drew’s Tweet.
These tweets recognize that even within our present society women of color are still sidelined when it comes to having power, and silence is often the result of this absence of influence. This lack of agency felt by Black women in the movement attests to the social environments in place within the American society, whether intentionally created by white, upper-class women or not. “[O]ur cognitive actions also are influenced by our environment and the material things we inta-act with.”73 Because upper-class, white women typically do not have the same shared experiences as Black women, they are often unfamiliar with those experiences. Consequently, the shared experiences of Black women are more easily ignored, even if unintentionally. Women of color are then not afforded the same agency as upper-class, white women. Therefore, women of color’s narratives are positioned as a counter-rhetoric that has helped to grow the meaning of “shared experience” for those victim to sexual assault or harassment.

3.4. Representations of Black Women in the Media

Lack of power also influences the efficacy of one’s language within social movements. Subsequently, the suppression of Black women’s voices throughout history has resulted in stereotypes that have hindered the importance of listening to those voices. “Racist stereotypes of the strong, superhuman black woman are operative myths in the minds of many white women, allowing them to ignore the extent to which black women are likely to be victimized in this society...”74 Minister Bernice King, daughter of Martin

73 Gries, “Agential Matters,” 73.

74 hooks, From Margin to Center, 13.
Luther King Jr., used Twitter to stress how Black women and girls are mischaracterized and how feminist movements do not sufficiently denounce these stereotypes.

Be A King 🌐 @BerniceKing · Jul 23
Heartbreaking, horrific violations of Black women & girls. All inhumanity grieves me, but when Black women & girls are dehumanized, often the girls are characterized as adults; both women & girls are hyper-sexualized; & movements like #MeToo 🧑多元化 don’t encompass their dehumanization.

Figure 13. Bernice King’s Tweet.

King’s tweet significantly illustrates how Black female bodies are viewed differently as opposed to their white female counterparts. By stereotyping African-American girls as adults and both women and girls as “hyper-sexualized,” their bodies are not regarded with the same importance as a white girl’s or woman’s body. In Representations of Black Women in Media, Marquita Marie Gammage explains how these representations affect society, “These images become internalized and reflected in Americans [sic] understandings of Black women.” Thus, these stereotypes of Black women’s bodies prevent some white activists from identifying Black women as victims. This group deemed “non-victims” is then placed into a different “social position” than those worthy of claiming “victimhood,” which results in the diminishment of their voices and stories. Twitter user Ashleigh Shackelford explains how this exclusion from the privilege of

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76 Ardener, “Ardener's ‘Muted Groups.’”
being able to claim that she has been a victim of sexual violence prevents her from sharing her stories.

Figure 14. Ashleigh Shackelford’s Tweet.

Shackelford equates her “Black fat body” with “denied victimhood.” Therefore, the characteristics placed on Black bodies has become a factor in silencing Black women. Shackelford says she is “too afraid to talk” about her sexual assault experiences. The tweets from King and Shackelford emphasize how Black bodies are considered unworthy in American society and this lack of acknowledging certain bodies prohibits society from seeing the victimization of Black girls and women. When Black female bodies are not seen as equal to white female bodies, the ability of black women and girls to speak out about violence committed against them is diminished. Likewise, by pairing these concerns with “#MeToo,” King and Shackelford are tackling aspects of the Twitter campaign that are failing for Black bodies. King mentions that the movement has not

77 I would like to acknowledge that Ashleigh Shackelford’s tweet also references body size as a factor that results in denial of being able to claim she is a victim. Men and women who are visibly larger than their potential attacker are routinely asked why they couldn’t “fight” the assailant off. However, for the focus of this thesis, I do not address this aspect in my analyses.

involved discussions around the “dehumanization” of Black girls and women. This apparent neglect of a group of people based on stereotypes allows for the dominant group within this movement to continue as the primary representatives of sexual violence. The dominant group is freed from including alternative narratives, while the marginalized group is left afraid to speak of their experiences and unembraced by the social movement.\textsuperscript{79}

\textbf{3.5. The Strength of a Voice}

Historically, bell hooks has pointed out that, “bonding as victims created a situation in which assertive, self-affirming women were often seen as having no place in feminist movement. It was this logic that led white women activists...to suggest that black women were so ‘strong’ they did not need to be active in feminist movement.”\textsuperscript{80} Many women of color Twitter users have actively identified how white women have placed them in the sidelines of social movements. Airea D. Matthews writes that she hopes movements like #MeToo and #TimesUp gives women of color space to be heard.

\textsuperscript{79} Kramarae, “Women as a Muted Group,” 21.

\textsuperscript{80} hooks, \textit{From Margin to Center}, 45.
Matthews expresses that she has been “hurt by [white] women worse” than men. And this is not an uncommon occurrence for women of color. Traditionally, “black women's experiences of sexual assault, and their work to end it, are too often the first accounts to be doubted, ignored, and excluded from the mainstream conversation.”

For example, during the first few months of the #MeToo movement, actress Lena Dunham, known for her work in the HBO series Girls, denounced a woman of color’s rape accusation against a male Girls writer. This clearly racist behavior shown is harmful to women of color’s voices and contributions within social movements. The division of whose accusations are accepted within movements “aids in consigning [women of color] to positions of little

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82 Joho, “Black actresses ask the world to stand by them during the #MeToo movement.”
freedom or power.” In an interview with the New York Times, actress Gabrielle Union discusses why women of color have not been heard as loudly within the #MeToo movement. She says, “I don’t think it’s a coincidence whose pain has been taken seriously. Whose pain we have shown historically and continued to show. Whose pain is tolerable and whose pain is intolerable. And whose pain needs to be addressed now.”

Union explains that it is white women’s “pain” that has become the central focus for social movements and claims it is this pain that will continue to do so. Furthermore, she knows that women of color’s pain is unequal to that of white women’s by asserting that some pain is “tolerable” and others’ painful experiences are “intolerable.” She also assesses that it is Black women whose pain needs to be at the forefront of conversations. This is a counter-rhetoric to the discourse that is in the main headlines of the #MeToo movement.

However, musician Daily Kelela points out on Twitter that white women have been known for their lack of support for women of color. This again establishes whose voice is given more agency.

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Daily Kelela’s tweet is significant because she is explaining the relationship many women of color feel toward white women during social movements or times of vulnerability. She describes how white women fail to protect Black women and do not readily support them during social movements. She notes that, because she is a Black woman, her voice will not “get taken as seriously” as a white woman’s. The language in Kelela’s tweet suggests that dominant (white) groups of women are able to generate narratives that are supported by other white women’s “conception of the world” and experiences of sexual violence. Kelela also recognizes the complexities that make it more difficult for women of color to express themselves during movements such as

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#MeToo. Because they are not protected by white women, women of color struggle to express their stories and have their stories heard. Consequently, the #MeToo movement has seen many situations like Artful Sol alludes to concerning Neil DeGrasse Tyson.

Allegations against Neil DeGrasse Tyson didn’t garner any traction when a black woman came forward years ago, but only when two non-black women came forward did it gain media attention. Note such disparities in mist of the #MeToo movement. There’s no BW/ #Feminist inclusion #ADOS

Figure 17. Artful Sol’s Response to Indivisible Network’s Tweet.

Artful Sol’s response to Indivisible Network’s tweet focuses on how sexual assault stories “gain media attention” depending on race. She references that years prior to the #MeToo movement a Black woman claimed Tyson sexually harassed her but her
story was never heard. The woman, Tchiya Amet, was in graduate school with Tyson when she claims he sexual assaulted her. She originally came forward with those accusations in 2014 and 2016, but no one responded to her claims. It was not until two white women accused Tyson of assault during the #MeToo movement that Amet’s story received any attention from the media.\footnote{Anna North, “Tchiya Amet went public with allegations against Tyson in 2010. Why is her story only getting attention now?” \emph{Vox}, last modified December 6, 2018, https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/12/6/18125457/neil-degrasse-tyson-tchiya-amet-ashley-watson.} This is an example of how a Black woman’s voice can go unheard for years. It also shows how race has been a determining factor in whose story holds more power in order to gain the media’s attention. Artful Sol asks readers to “note such disparities in mist [sic] of the #MeToo movement.” By drawing attention to the inequalities of voices, Artful Sol offers insight into the fact that Black women and girls’ narratives have historically been disregarded, even only a few short years before the #MeToo movement began.

Nevertheless, Me Too founder Tarana Burke does not believe that being placed at the outskirts should stop women of color from participating in this movement. In an interview with Not Without Black Women, Burke stated that the #MeToo movement is by and for women of color. She takes hold of her agency as a participant and encourages other women to do so, as well.
This tweet acknowledges how women of color have been muted “since the beginning of time,” but it also provides hope that with the #MeToo movement women of color will be heard. Claiming to be “the resistance you’ve been waiting for” invokes a sense of refusal to give up and refusal to continue to go unheard. The women of color in the “present” are able to speak out more now because of women from the “past” and are doing so to ensure “future” generations of Black women do not remain muted in the conversations about sexual violence. When addressing the differences of race relations within feminist movements, hooks claims that “it is essential for continued feminist struggle that black
women recognize the special vantage point [their] marginality gives [them] and make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony.” However, white women must also be willing to support women of color and step aside for them to take center stage on discussions that will benefit stronger, and more inclusive, narratives of what sexual violence looks like within other communities.

3.6 Conclusion

The #MeToo campaign has seen an influx of counter-rhetoric from women of color since it has been largely dominated by white, upper/middle class women. Me Too creator Tarana Burke was immediately pushed to the margins of this movement when it first exploded on Twitter, and this chapter has shown how many other women of color have used the social media platform to express concern that their voices, and other like them, have been marginalized when discussing sexual harassment and assault. Their “counter-discourse” to the larger conversation of the #MeToo movements helps audiences understand that shared experiences can vary among different groups of people. The tweets analyzed exemplify how the voices of women of color and working-class women do not carry the same weight as those of white, upper-class women. These tweets expand the #MeToo movement, highlight areas for improvement and growth.

Is there a way to eliminate dominant and subordinate groups within social movements and, instead, create a collective discourse in which contributions are equally “weighted” or valued regardless of contributors’ skin color or social status? As bell hooks

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87 hooks, From the Margin to Center, 15.
advises, “to develop political solidarity between women...rather than bond on the basis of shared victimization or in response to a false sense of a common enemy, [women] can bond on the basis of [the] political commitment to a feminist movement that aims to end [sexual violence].”\textsuperscript{88} If the end goal is to end sexual harassment and assault against all peoples, then the #MeToo movement must do more to become inclusive of narratives beyond those of white, upper-class, cisgender females.

\textsuperscript{88} hooks, \textit{From the Margin to Center}, 47.
Chapter 4: Conclusion

Over the past decade, the use of hashtags has increased as a way to unite social media users within a conversation, such as #IceBucketChallenge or #NastyWomen. These hashtags, and others like them, have sometimes been described as trends that quickly faded. However, others, like #BlackLivesMatter, have persisted and expanded, becoming larger than just temporary moments of activism. What is it that enables some hashtags to withstand time? The immense collection of more than 19 million tweets produced with “#MeToo” underscores the impact of this movement. The tweets are public records that testify to women’s experiences of sexual harassment and assault. But, what will help this hashtag movement stay relevant over time? It is the hashtag itself, the people using the hashtag, and the conversations taking place online and offline around the hashtag.

By looking at the rhetoric of this movement using rhetorical theory, especially theories of rhetorical ecologies and feminist “counter-publics,” this thesis aims to illuminate the rhetorical system—productive interactions of rhetors, technology, and other aspects of the rhetorical “environment” (including existing political and discursive contexts)—that has engendered MeToo as a discourse and social movement. This movement has proven durable within the United States. Currently, the #MeToo movement shows no sign of slowing down or going away. In fact, it continues to spread to other areas of the world.

During the 2018 Oscar Awards, held on March 5, many actresses brought activists as their dates. The actresses were refusing typical interview questions about their work or the designers of their gowns and instead, opting for interviewers to direct questions only
to their dates. This gave activists an opportunity and outlet to discuss the work they have been doing for years. Twitter was particularly focused on the positive aspects of seeing activists walk the red carpets alongside celebrities. During the broadcast of the red-carpet event, Indian actress Shruti Seth tweeted how it was the #MeToo movement that sparked these conversations.

![Shruti Seth’s Tweet](image)

Figure 19. Shruti Seth’s Tweet.

Though filled with “immense hope for big change,” Seth noted that similar conversations had not yet reached India: “We’re a millennia away from those conversations here but atleast (sic) they’ve started somewhere.” A few months later in 2018, Bollywood\(^{89}\) did begin to have their own moments within the #MeToo movement. However, because of the existence of intense victim-blaming, even in the legal system, Indian women remain hesitant to speak out. Additionally, when reporting their sexual assault experiences Indian women face higher risks of losing their jobs or having their reputations destroyed.\(^{90}\) This

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\(^{89}\) Hindi cinema.

is an example of how different cultural practices or aspects of the rhetorical environment can influence a discourse and social movement.

Part of the idea behind this thesis was to invoke the same feelings that were felt by people using Twitter during the peak moments of the #MeToo movement. I purposefully wanted to use images of tweets with the MeToo hashtag to emulate the feelings that could be provoked by a Twitter feed. Twitter as a form of writing, sharing, and reading stories is much different from writing or reading a novel. Users are only given 280 characters per tweet. Therefore, rhetors are very selective about the words they use in each tweet. Attached to the words of each tweet sent with #MeToo is the image of the woman, or man, who experienced sexual assault or harassment. In a sense, the pairing of survivors’ photos with their story invokes greater feelings of connection—even if you’ve never met them.

To ensure the continued durability of this movement, the discourse of Me Too must keep evolving. Peak moments within the movement are important for generating and recirculating texts. Celebrity culture can help promote those peaks but conditions, like those examined within this paper, must also be in place to promote continued materialization.
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