UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Who is the Me of #MeToo? A Critical Discourse Analysis of Hashtag Feminism

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ARTS

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF BA

HONOURS IN COMMUNICATIONS

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION, MEDIA, AND FILM

CALGARY, ALBERTA

APRIL 2019

Abstract

Despite sexual assault activist and women of colour Tarana Burke's decade long efforts to create and cultivate the Me Too Movement, the virality of #MeToo is often seen as a feminist hashtag movement started by Hollywood actress, Alyssa Milano. Milano used Twitter to call for others to speak out against their experiences with sexual assault using #MeToo and Burke's long-established movement went viral with little credit afforded to the original creator. Using Foucault's theorization on discursive power and intersectional feminist theory, this thesis sought to interrogate how Burke's marginalization speaks to a broader discursive pattern of marginalizing or rendering invisible certain identities through #MeToo. Thus, this thesis sought to complicate the notion of accessibility that hashtag feminism like #MeToo is popularly touted for. By conducting an intersectional feminist critical discourse analysis of 100 tweets from November 29th to December 25th, 2017, I found #MeToo discourses to be Americanized, reductive in its intersectional discussions, and influenced by Twitter's value-laden platform affordances. The subsequent implications of these discursive trends highlight the extent to which #MeToo both challenges patriarchal violence and oppression while recreating and entrenching other forms of social oppression.

Acknowledgements

This thesis being in many ways a culmination of my academic journey thus far, I would be remiss in not acknowledging those that have made this thesis possible. First, I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to Dr. Jessalynn Keller. Her enthusiasm, her invaluable insight as a feminist scholar, and her unwavering faith in me has made this thesis, dare I say, a pleasure to write. I would also like to thank Dr. Dawn Johnston and Dr. Tamara Shepherd for not only volunteering their time to be a part of my committee but for inspiring my critical scholarship throughout my undergraduate degree. To Dr. Samantha Thrift whose ability to build friendship and rapport in classrooms led our Honours seminar to embody feminist pedagogy and community, thank you so much. I would also like to extend a special thanks to Dr. Lisa Stowe. I was first introduced to the joys of research through you and you have inspired me to write vulnerably and with my heart. To Sam and Dan who have both encouraged, edited, and listened to me cry as we wrote our theses together, thank you for being my supports throughout this process. Finally, to my mother who inspires me to be compassionate despite life's hardships, I am the woman I am today because of you.

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter introduces my motivations for undertaking this critical analysis of #MeToo and the main research questions that guided this investigation. I then outline the theoretical frameworks by which I critically analyze the discourses of #MeToo. Michel Foucault's theoretical understandings of power, discourse, and subjection are defined and explained. Following this, feminist critiques regarding the utility of Foucault's work in furthering feminist scholarship are explored briefly as well as explanations of how I use Foucault's work for a feminist discourse analysis. An overview of intersectional feminist theory that informs the critique of #MeToo then follows. I then outline the ways the theoretical framework of Foucault, feminist scholarship, and intersectionality is applied to this project for a feminist critical discourse analysis. Following this methodological explanation is an account of how data collection was undertaken to create a sample of #MeToo tweets to be analyzed.

As a sexual assault survivor and a queer woman of colour, I felt both represented and ignored by #MeToo; I was both an assumed insider and inexplicably an outsider. I began this critical analysis of the viral hashtag because I felt that it was my duty to interrogate the ways I and many others were asked to shed their race, their sexuality, as well as their ability, age, and socioeconomic status to be considered a worthy victim of sexual assault. While #MeToo prompted many women to share their testimonies of sexual assault as part of a unified voice, its exclusive discursive constructions implicitly asked many women to leave behind the other ways in which they were vulnerable. Online discussions are often touted as accessible forums for discussing politicized issues and for disempowered people to have their voice heard as part of democratic conversation. However, this analysis seeks to complicate the idea of how accessible #MeToo actually is.

"Me too" is a phrase coined by sexual assault survivor and African American feminist activist Tarana Burke, both to validate the experiences of fellow survivors and women of color and to draw attention to the systemic pervasiveness of rape culture and sexual victimization (Johnson et al, 2018; Zackereck, Dockterman, & Sweetland Edwards, 2018). The phrase "Me too" went viral on October 15th, 2017, a decade after Burke's initial use, when Twitter users responded to Hollywood actress Alyssa Milano's tweet saying, "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet." In an outpouring of testimonies, thoughtful responses to other users, and words of encouragement with #MeToo, the hashtag soon became one of the most widely discussed and engaged with works of hashtag feminism to date (Johnson et al, 2018; Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018). In reviving Burke's decade old movement to bring to light the widespread incidence of sexual violence, Twitter was utilized as a discursive public sphere for feminist discourses where women could speak about their experiences, critically engage with the prevalent infiltration of rape culture in everyday life, and build communities that stand together against sexual victimization. In this way, #MeToo is a contemporaneous case study of the ways feminist discourses of consciousness raising, community building, and testimonials evolve as they are increasingly being remediated through online platforms and digital affordances (Rentschler, 2014).

The accessibility of Twitter-mediated feminist engagement, the affordances through which participants are able to form communities of solidarity, and the ways in which the internet often acts as an inaugural portal into feminist activism highlight the significant developments made possible by the movement of feminism into digital spheres (Keller, 2016; Mendes, et al, 2018; Rentschler, 2014). However, while the affordances enabled by the platform may be developments that move forward the feminist agenda for social change and allow individual women to feel empowered and supported, one would be remiss in not acknowledging the ways the platform

privileges certain voices over others. I argue that the discourses of #MeToo, while viral and empowering, privileges the voices of white female celebrities as the champions of the movement. The discourse of #MeToo reflects already extant societal inequalities based on intersectional identities, as well as the values embedded in the affordances and cultural practices of the facilitating platform, Twitter.

I argue that the remediation of feminist discourses through platforms like Twitter often conflate feminist engagement with platform engagement and that such conflation often encourages participants to be uncritical of the ways the platform plays an active role in shaping the discourse. Thus, #MeToo offers an opportunity to investigate the ways feminist discourses maintain their critical nature whilst simultaneously being influenced by the values embedded in the mediating platform. This study maps the contours of the #MeToo discourse on Twitter by conducting a critical discourse analysis of tweets in a way that is mindful of how the platform itself is an active social agent that has the means to reproduce social inequalities such as an intersectional erasure that deprioritizes the experiences of various women. The main guiding research questions are:

(1) What is the discourse around sexual violence and harassment in #MeToo on Twitter?

(2) How are pre-existing social inequalities reflected in the characteristics of this discourse?

(3) How are the values embedded in the affordances and user culture of Twitter reflected in the characteristics of this discourse?

Theoretical Framework

Discursive Power and the Subject

In theorizing about the interrelationship of power and discourse, Foucault departs from his Marxist predecessors by rejecting the centralized model of power and instead understands power

as decentralized and multiple (McHoul & Grace, 1997). Rather than focusing on the ways those of privilege repress others by forceful exercises of power, Foucault argues that power is a localized experience that operates in the realm of everyday life and is always met with resistance (McHoul & Grace, 1997). Related to his understanding of power, systems of discourse are understood as dominant paradigms of thinking or bodies of knowledge that enable and delimit the possible ways people can construct their understanding of the world (Foucault, 1970). For Foucault (1970), all that can be known, understood, argued for, or thought about is structured by these 'epistemes' of discourse as power operates through it.

To this point, Foucault contends that power relations that shape discourse subsequently create particular subject positions for people (McHoul & Grace, 1997). This subjection process is the property of discursive structures by which individuals are enabled to conceptualize themselves as being identifiable in certain ways and not in others through social norms, practices, and institutions (McHoul & Grace, 1997; McLaren, 2002). Thus, the social locations of gender, race, economic status, sexuality, and ability become categories of identity formation while other qualities are rendered unessential for constructing identity. In this way, Foucault is making the argument that the very qualities that people understand as formative of their identity is a product of power and discourse rather than being essential categories of difference amongst individuals (McHoul & Grace, 1997).

Foucault, however, does not understand exercises of power, discursive structures, and subjection as deterministic (McHoul and Grace, 1997). In fact, he argues against any essentialist and deterministic understanding of contemporary paradigms as dictum. For Foucault, the concept of dominant discourses highlights the processes by which some knowledges are privileged over others (McHoul and Grace, 1997). In contrast to dominant discourse, Foucault (1980) introduces the concept of 'subjugated knowledges.' Foucault (1980) defines subjugated knowledges as

epistemologies that are "disqualified as inadequate to their task, or insufficiently elaborated – naïve knowledges, located low down in the hierarchy…" (p. 82). Dominant discourses, on the other hand, are privileged, normalized, made functional and official (Foucault & McGordan, 1980). It is to this end that I argue that Foucault's theorizations of power and discourse are of particular utility in analyzing how dominant ways of knowing are engendered and challenged by subjugated knowledges.

In studying the discourses of #MeToo, Foucault's theories lend themselves to the interrogation of how discourse operates as functions of domination and resistance. In this way, Foucault's theorizations provide tools for interrogating the discursive oppression and activism of #MeToo. In critically analyzing the ways feminists of different social locations engage with politics through online discussion, Foucault's theories on subjection and subjugated knowledges provide analytical tools for understanding how women of different social location will experience varying levels of subjugation from their #MeToo participation.

Feminism and Foucault

Due to the politically emancipatory nature of feminist scholarship, it is committed to theories that enable critical social analyses and can bolster inclusiveness, equality, accessibility of knowledge and language, and democracy (McLaren, 2002). In the field of feminist scholarship, the degree to which Foucault's androcentric understandings of power, discourse, and subjection are antithetical to feminist critique are hotly debated. However, feminist scholars like Margaret McLaren and Jana Sawicki argue for the utility of Foucauldian theory for feminist analysis.

In her analysis of feminist critiques of Foucault, McLaren (2002) argues that Foucault's understanding of subjection, while some understand it as passive and overdetermined, can be utilized in feminist scholarship to conceptualize socially and historically constructed embodied

subjectivities as having political and social agency. For example, McLaren (2002) interrogates the caution that Foucault (1981) espouses in his *History of Sexuality* in which he argues that public discourse around sexuality was a means of discursively controlling sexuality rather than being a sexually liberatory change in society. Through McLaren's (2002) understanding of Foucault's (1981) *History of Sexuality*, one can see that what topics are discussed in society is what areas of life power pervades and controls through discursive construction. However, according to McLaren (2002) and Foucault (1981), what is discursively constructed is also what can be reimagined across societies through resistance. In this way, McLaren's (2002) understanding of subjection provides room for analyzing how participants of #MeToo are both socially, historically, and in this case, technologically constituted subjects that still have the capacity to engender subversive meaning-making. To this end, in discussing the pervasiveness of sexual violence through #MeToo, experiences of sexual violence are discursively controlled, utilized to create subjects, but is also now a realm in which subjects can contribute to discourse to subvert dominant understandings of sexualized and gendered violence.

On a similar note, Sawicki's (1991) insight into Foucault's theories around power and resistance in everyday life suggest that feminists can both protest against specific forms of oppression while contributing to its reproduction. In this way, the participants of #MeToo and the platform that facilitates the discourse can be understood as both victims and agents of domination, both changemakers and oppressors. This balanced understanding of how #MeToo participants are both subversive and potentially oppressive contributors to discourse will be informed through intersectional considerations of how power pervades women's lives in various and potentially contradictory ways.

Intersectional Feminism

Intersectionality as a concept articulates the modes by which multiple axes of oppression and power simultaneously and dynamically shape lived experience (Carastathis, 2014; Crenshaw, 1991). Originating from Black feminist thought, the term came about as a response to monistic understandings of social oppression and privilege (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). Intersectionality sought to address the legal, academic, and social justice shortcomings of singular axes thinking (Cho et al, 2013; Crenshaw, 1991). Various other terms have been introduced throughout academia to conceptualize similar ideas such as Beale's (1970) 'double jeopardy', the Combahee River Collectives 'simultaneity', or Collins' (1991) 'race-gender-class' (Noble, 2016).

As a theoretical understanding of how power operates in society, intersectionality enables an interrogation of the ways those who simultaneously experience multiple forms of oppression based on their gender, race, socioeconomic class, ability, etc. have qualitatively different experiences than monistic definitions of gendered, racialized, classist, or ableist discrimination could articulate (Crenshaw, 1991). It is an approach to conceptualizing lived experience as irreducible to one axes of oppression and as not fully captured from being understood as a summative practice of adding one form of oppression to another to create causal explanations of social life (Carastathis, 2014). In her analysis of Crenshaw's (1991) work, Carastathis (2014) contends that an intersectional approach offers four analytical benefits to research: simultaneity, complexity, irreducibility, and inclusivity. To this point, privilege and disempowerment for this project will be understood as simultaneous, complex, and irreducible social processes and will actively work to include all categories of identity in its analysis of #MeToo. It is important to note that intersectionality as a method is fluid, intentionally flexible and ambiguous (Carastathis, 2014; Fotopoulou, 2012). To this end, this study moves forward with a theoretical, methodological, and

analytical commitment to critical engagement, self-reflexivity, inclusivity, and especially empathy with its interrogation of the #MeToo discourse while utilizing the approach's flexibility of method as an imperative advantage to analysis.

Methodology

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a multidisciplinary approach that is theoretically informed by Foucault's (1970) study of power. Critical discourse analysis is, as the name suggests, a critical approach utilized in multiple disciplines to interrogate how power structures are maintained, abused, and utilized to marginalize and oppress those not in power (Van Dijk, 1993). Due to its fluidity of method, CDA has been widely employed in various disciplines to study the processes by which power pervades society and often, how power structures can be subverted (Fairclough, 2012). Fairclough (2012) argues that CDA is a "transdisciplinary" approach which entails a study of social change that progresses in dialogue with other disciplines and theories (p.452). By not being confined to the logic of a single discipline, CDA works to provide accounts of how discursive changes in dominant discourse subsequently alter material aspects of social life (Fairclough, 2012). According to Van Dijk (1993), CDA is an approach to research that does not hesitate in taking a normative stance on how to subvert social inequality. Instead, CDA is an approach that explicitly offers a critique of social structures that oppress and marginalize the non-elite and offers a means of social reform.

To this end, while CDA is explicitly interested in the study of power, oppression, and elucidating on how to engender social change, feminist scholars like Lazar (2007) argue that when employed to do feminist research, it is important to flag feminist CDA as such. Like Foucauldian approaches to CDA, feminist scholarship is concerned with "eliminating boundaries that privilege

dominant forms of knowledge building, boundaries that mark who can be a knower and what can be known." (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p.7). Additionally, feminist research, like CDA is about elucidating subjugated knowledges and taking problem with power relations and authority. Specifically addressing when CDA is used for feminist research, Lazar (2007) contends that feminist CDA is an approach that is invested in shedding light on the ways often unacknowledged forms of social hegemony and gendered assumptions "are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities" (p. 142). Feminist scholars, like other critical social scholars who utilize CDA, reject the idea of objective inquiry (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Hesse-Biber (2014), in her how-to for feminist research, contends that feminist scholarship involves self-reflexive acknowledgement of how emotional investment has an integral role in guiding what perspectives are given voice and how research subjects are interpreted and analyzed. Like Van Djik's (1993) understanding of CDA, feminist discourse analysis takes a normative stance and acknowledges the social consequences of its academic work (Lazar, 2007). While critical discourse researchers like Fairclough (2012) highlight the ways discourses impact and shape social practices, feminist approaches to critical discourse further emphasize the gendered nature of discourse that often disempower, marginalize, and exclude women (Lazar, 2007).

It is important to note that feminist CDA, while focused on the way patriarchal social structures oppress women, does recognize that oppression is experienced through the intersections between women's gender and other facets of their social location (Lazar, 2007). Through this acknowledgement, intersectionality-informed feminist CDA seeks to create comparative research, rather than universalizing accounts of discursive forms of oppression for women who experience disempowerment in both similar and different ways. It is in this way that feminist CDA is a means of academic activism that seeks to engender radical social change (Lazar, 2007).

In regard to taking an intersectional approach for this research, it is imperative to note that like feminist scholarship and Foucauldian critical analysis, an intersectional approach does not define a set of analytical tools for conducting research (Fotopoulou, 2012). While intersectional feminist approaches are often criticized for this lack of set tools, much like CDA and other feminist scholarship, I consider this disciplinary fluidity and flexibility a strength for examining the multiple avenues of power seen in Twitter's #MeToo discourses (Fotopoulou, 2012).

I move forward with this study by adopting this intersectionality-informed approach to feminist CDA. This offers a means of investigating the ways in which discursive practices of dominance and resistance interact on Twitter to shape the feminist discourses organized around #MeToo and the knowledges produced through these discourses. I contend that this approach will give appropriate attention to the ways that social inequalities are recreated in online discourses, while also enabling a flexibility of method to interrogate the ways emerging power inequalities vis-a-vis new media technology differently affect women of varying social location. Through this approach, the ways in which hegemonic relationships are subverted through #MeToo discourse, as well as how it reflects societally extant discriminations against non-cis gendered, able-bodied, economically privileged white women, and Twitter's agency in facilitating this process can be considered.

It is, however, important to note the limitations of this study. While an intersectional feminist CDA approach enables one the flexibility to investigate the multidirectional ways power operates through the #MeToo discourse, the ways in which subjects are differently affected by their social location cannot be studied through this method if the social location of the subjects or those being discursively constructed via #MeToo or Twitter profiles cannot be discerned. Thus, while understandable for many discourses around #MeToo to be framed as binary male assailants vs. female victims, this study will seek to complicate this discussion by considering who is less

prominent and who is simply invisible while acknowledging that all categories of identity and nuances of lived experience and oppression cannot be analyzed within one study.

Data Collection

For this intersectional feminist critical discourse analysis of #MeToo, I collected a total of 100 tweets. All tweets analyzed were collected from an archival database (https://data.world/balexturner/390-000-metoo-tweets) established by Brett Turner (2018). This database had a total of 390,000 tweets with #MeToo ranging from November 29th, 2017 to December 25th, 2017. While this timeframe did not allow me to analyze the #MeToo Twitter discourse directly following the hashtag's virality, nor a wide date range in the months following the hashtag's success, I was able to analyze the #MeToo discourse shortly after Milano's inaugural tweet on October 15th, 2017 and after Twitter conversations around #MeToo had time to settle into established discursive vernacular. For my analysis, I interrogated the discursive elements of the text of the tweet, articles linked and shared through tweets, the user's profile information, comments left in response to tweets when available, and whether tweets were replied to, favourited, or retweeted and by whom.

Of the 390,000 tweets available in the digital archive, I took every 780th tweet following the first for analysis to enable a random but systematic selection that produced a sample of 500 tweets. I eventually reduced the sample size to that of 100 tweets for its feasibility within the constraints of an undergraduate honours thesis while still being a large enough data set to distinguish discernible discursive patterns in #MeToo's Twitter discourse. The random, interval selection of tweets for analysis ensured that tweets were not selected based on its level of public engagement (as revealed by the number of favourites, retweets, or replies). Due to my focus on how certain people are marginalized from equally contributing to online feminist discourses, I

argue that a randomly selected data sample is the most likely to produce an unbiased representation

of what voices were contributing to #MeToo conversations and their levels of public engagement.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter situates my study within an existing body of literature on digital feminist activism and critical studies of social media platforms from a socio-technical perspective. The literature on digital feminist activism positions #MeToo as part of a tradition of feminists utilizing digital affordances and provides an investigation of how other hashtags were employed for feminist agendas. Literature on the sociotechnical critique of social media platforms informs the analysis of how the affordances of Twitter, as the facilitating online platform, influences the discourses of #MeToo.

Digital Feminist Activism

It is important to emphasize how the employment of hashtags for feminist agendas are a remediation, rather than a transformation, of digital feminist practices. In doing so, the analysis of #MeToo is necessarily informed by the tradition of how feminists do politics online and how the digital mediation affords specific modes of extending the feminist agenda. Scholarship in the field of digital feminist activism point out that feminist use of digital platforms to engage in subversive discourses that interrogate rape culture and engender communities of politically engaged women and girls have existed long before hashtag feminism became popular (Baer, 2016; Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018; Rentschler 2014; Thrift, 2014).

It is first important to note the common political approach that digital feminism engages with online. In her study of how Australian bloggers worked to reframe female rockers in pop culture, Shaw (2012) argues that the predominant mode of political protest that feminists utilize in digital spaces is that of discursive activism. Discursive activism seeks to disrupt dominant understandings through participatory meaning-making and public conversations that redefine and reconstruct problematic or narrowly-conceived representations of reality (Shaw, 2012). Shaw

(2012) emphasizes that online discourse, regardless of it igniting offline collective action, can inspire sociopolitical change. On a similar note, Knight-Steele (2016) explores the ways black celebrity gossip blogs without an explicit feminist leaning, bring together women otherwise separated by geography or socioeconomic status and facilitate conversations that question lived experiences of sexism and racism. In doing so, she argues that the bloggers engage with valid, feminist practices that engendered communities of support and meaningful discourse (Knight-Steele, 2016).

Similarly, blogs with an explicit feminist leaning made and maintained by young girls, for Keller (2011), are a space in which girls redefine themselves as critically engaged feminists despite their exclusion from traditionally political spheres (Keller & Ringrose, 2015). In these ways, critically engaged discussions that seek to reconceptualize problematic worldviews is what mobilizes practices of online feminism as political, regardless of its explicit feminist focus or potential for offline collective action. For this study, it is imperative to note the modes of political engagement that #MeToo and its digital feminist predecessors utilize. Scholarship in the field of digital feminist studies agrees that by disrupting existing paradigms through agonistic, publicized discussion, online feminism does politics through discussions that subvert hegemonic conceptualizations of identity and subjective experiences.

Existing scholarship contends that hashtag feminism is an extension and evolution towards the use of more scalable media rather than a technologically-driven feminist revolution. Rentschler (2014) notes how online zine culture is an extension of the DIY and testimonial traditions of feminism into online spaces. Similarly, Keller (2011) notes that traditional feminist agendas of consciousness-raising and solidarity building are remediated in feminist blogspheres. Feminist social media pages dedicated to interrogating lived experiences of sexism like Tumblr's "stfurapeculture", mobile applications like *Hollaback!* that amplify feminist witnessing, and

memes that critique sexist political rhetoric are also examples of how feminists have taken advantage of new media affordances long before the height of #MeToo's popularity (Rentschler, 2014; Rentschler & Thrift, 2015; Thrift, 2014). When acknowledging these forms of online feminism that exist prior and adjacent to hashtag feminism, it is critical to note that while the modes of feminist engagement differ, they speak to one another to extend feminist agendas in ways that best fit the affordances of particular media forms.

Often, studies of feminism online challenge the notion that online spaces are the realm of play and ephemeral performances of politics. It is important to note that this is a common challenge in engaging academically with digitally-mediated politics. Scholarship agrees that new media is a valid means of engaging in politics and that it affords new abilities that can benefit platform users in politically instrumental ways. For Baer (2016), digital activism is not a move toward post-feminism, but rather, a shift away from pursuing legislative rights-based social justice. Through the feminist migration to online platforms, what counts as political is reimagined as the act of galvanizing around and publicizing subversive ideas that challenge gendered practices of domination (Baer, 2016). It should be noted that this feminist migration to online platforms has not been total or antagonistic to on-the-street protests. As Baer (2016) highlights, the growing popularity of feminism online actually parallels the popularity of offline political demonstrations like SlutWalk, FEMEN, Pussy Riot, and the Women's Marches.

Similarly, in his study of how women of Prince Edward Island engaged in online and offline activism regarding their access to abortion, Myles (2018) emphasizes the ways online strategies coalesce with and fortify offline demonstrations and vice versa. The intertextual employment of hashtags and iconography demonstrate the ways the aggregating and organizational affordances of digital activism can be utilized for political action without the movement being limited to a digitized realm (Myles, 2018). Likewise, Rentschler (2014) makes

note of the back and forth between offline current events and online feminist discussions made possible by digital platform mediation. Rentschler and Thrift (2015) argue that the ephemerality of online media, like memes, is the operative condition by which online feminists can have a networked response and intervene in contemporary political debates in real-time. Rather than being ephemeral online trends with no permanent political ramifications, existing scholarship demonstrates how feminists are taking advantage of the affordances of digital mediation to further their political agenda without losing sight of their goals of tangible social change.

Digital feminism also enables feminists to discuss subversive ideas without the censorship of traditional media outlets. Rentschler (2014) argues that the feminist use of social media is a response to the re-creation of problematic cultural ideas about gendered reality by traditional media. In a similar vein, Williams (2015) contends that digital feminism is a way for women of color to circumvent traditional news media re-creation of racialized and gendered stereotypes. In this way, the move of feminist discussion to online spaces demonstrates a commitment to feminist discourse that bypasses the barriers of traditional media outlets and enables more nuanced discussions that include a wider range of perspectives.

Literature on the field of digitally mediated feminism agree that while many are apt to see hashtag feminism as a revolution of mediated activism, in actuality, hashtag feminism exists adjacent to and learns from other modes of online feminist practices. Digital feminism demonstrates feminist employment of instrumental political tools to further their agenda in ways that circumvent traditional media gatekeepers and often extend the efficacy of offline protests. Additionally, scholarship in this field contends with challenges to the viability of digital platforms as a political instrument, but agree that by engaging women in discursive politics, digital feminism is anything but apolitical.

Affordances of Hashtag Feminism

#MeToo is one of the most highly publicized instances of hashtag feminism to date, a practice wherein a platform, usually Twitter, mediates feminist discourse by organizing content and galvanizing platform users around a hashtag (Clarke, 2016; Mendes et al, 2018). #MeToo, however, is far from being the first of its kind. #YesAllWomen (Thrift, 2014), #Aufschrei, (Baer, 2015), #WhyIStayed (Clarke, 2016), and #BeenRapedNeverReported (Mendes et al, 2018) are just some of the hashtags that have critically engaged with rape culture before #MeToo was popularized.

Literature discussing the efficacy of hashtag feminism agrees that one of the most pertinent benefits of this feminist media practice is its ability to engender conversations that cross transnational boundaries (Baer, 2015; Stache, 2015). Higgs (2015) especially highlights that for transnational campaigns that originate in countries other than the US and are run by non-profits that cannot incur the high financial costs of international political movements, the ease of participating through hashtag-mediated activism is key. In saying this, it is important to highlight that most hashtag feminist movements reviewed in the literature focus on movements originating from North America. One of the limits of past literature in the field of hashtag feminism is its almost exclusive focus on Western audiences and movements focused on social change in North American or European cultures despite the transnational properties of hashtag activism. While literature on non-Western based movements are extant (e.g. Higgs, 2015; Khoja-Moolji, 2015), they are a minority in the existing scholarship.

Literature on the topic agree that a valuable affordance of hashtag feminism is its ability to discursively respond in real-time to current events and enable discourses that problematize examples of everyday sexism or make sense of especially socially-disruptive events. The triggering event of a hashtag can vary whether it be the Isla Vista shooting spree that engendered

#YesAllWomen (Thrift, 2014), dress code violations and #CropTopDay (Keller, 2018) or a *New York Times* article detailing the sexualized abuse of Hollywood starlets as was the case with #MeToo (Mendes et al, 2018). What is similar in these hashtags is that regardless of their triggering event, they were mobilized by feminists to discuss broader social issues like sexual entitlement and rape culture in relation to these events (Thrift, 2014; Conley, 2014). In this way, the disruptive, real-time responses made possible by feminist employment of hashtags augment the discursive activism of online feminists already extant in other modes of digital feminism.

Another affordance of hashtag feminism discussed in the literature is the ability to engender a sense of supportive community through shared experience and a feeling that one is not alone. The "narrative logic" of a hashtag creates a digital archive of shared experience that gives rise to a felt sense of community and an awareness that what participants personally experience speak to broad systemic problems in society (Clarke, 2016, p.789; Thrift, 2014; Mendes et al, 2018). For Clarke (2016), the utilization of a hashtag as a ready prompt that participants can populate with their personal testimonies is an integral memetic strength of hashtag feminism. Clarke (2016) argues that the hashtag form of discursive activism not only creates empowering networks of solidarity but also force traditional media to communicate more balanced, less problematic interpretations of current events. Likewise, Peters and Besley (2018) and Rentschler (2017) highlight the potential for highly publicized instances of hashtag feminism to act as public pedagogues. The public pedagogies of hashtag feminism, according to Peters and Besley (2018), provide the basis for research inquiry, publicity campaigns, and citizen engagement with government statistics. In these ways, the highly collective and publicized nature of hashtag feminism gives rise to communities of support that seek to validate and educate audiences.

Literature on hashtag feminism concur that there are political and communal affordances specific to the employment of hashtags for feminist work. These affordances both extend the work

of digital feminists that came before hashtag feminism became popular and engender new modes of feminist engagement. Scholarship highlights how the use of feminist hashtags enable transnational communication, interrogations of systemic social problems in response to current events, crowdsourced archives and networks of support, as well as public education.

Limits of Hashtag Feminism

While feminists utilize hashtags and other online affordances in empowering, critically engaged ways, scholars are also apt to emphasize that there are limitations unique to the hashtag mode of transmitting feminist campaigns.

It is important to note that hashtags are employed and misused for a variety of intentions online. Hashtags are polyvalent in that they can widely disseminate subversive political statements as well as "vitriolic online misogyny" (Horeck, 2014; Rentschler & Thrift, 2015, p. 332). For example, #JadaPose was a viral hashtag that was utilized to make light of a rape and murder victim's body (Williams, 2015). Analogously, Mendes et al, (2018) make note of the malleable nature of hashtags and the ways they can be co-opted by those motivated to interrupt feminist discussions. In examining the ways #WhyIStayed and #NotBuyingIt was misused, Stache (2014) points out that activist hashtags are employed for irrelevant or inappropriate posts that dilute the potency of the original messaging. In this way, Stache (2014) casts doubt on the efficacy of hashtag activism. Meyer (2014) echoes this sentiment in an analysis of collective culture jamming around the hashtag #thevagenda by questioning whether raising awareness of social causes also fosters agency and political action. Additionally, Baer (2016) and Thrift (2014) point out that counter hashtags like #NotAllMen, the virality of which engendered #YesAllWomen, have comparable levels of online engagement and popularity. These scholarly findings on the limits of hashtag

feminism are vital because the ways in which feminist hashtags are misused or countered by problematic hashtags necessarily inform some of the elements that shape #MeToo's discourses.

The positive efficacy of hashtag movements that originate in non-Western countries complicates discussions of how hashtag activism enables transnational communication. Khoja-Moolji (2015) in her analysis of a viral hashtag originating in Nigeria and Higgs (2015) in examining one that started in Kenya, similarly argue that both online modes of feminist activism predominantly engage Western audiences. In abstracting social movements from their countries of origin through hashtags and relying on affective social media participation, sociopolitical and historical contexts are lost and stereotypical conceptualizations of non-Western countries are recreated and entrenched (Higgs, 2015; Khoja-Moolji, 2015). In other words, the sociopolitical disadvantages of the global south are potentially recreated through hashtag activism. Furthermore, hashtag activism is not necessarily an effective means of public pedagogy for unpacking complex historical, global, and local reality (Higgs, 2015). Additionally, Higgs (2015) and Thelandersson (2014) both note how the character limit of tweets pose potential barriers for constructive debates and qualifications of one's argument due to limited space. It is critical to note the ways global relations of oppression and power are recreated in future studies of hashtag activism, as one of the key affordances of hashtag communication is in its transnational fluidity. In studying #MeToo that has recently gone viral in India, the ways in which it potentially prioritizes western audiences is a necessary consideration when analyzing its discourse.

On a more micro level, there are also invisible forms of vulnerability and labour for individual participants of hashtag activism. A point of contention in scholarly discussions of hashtag feminism revolve around the use of personal testimony. #MeToo's heavy reliance on personal testimony can therefore only be made sense of through an understanding of how this discursive act is understood by scholars in the study of other hashtag feminist movements. Myles

(2018) argues that the prevalence of personal testimony in movements like #MeToo, while effective in illustrating a multiplicity of experiences and narratives, can potentially make participants vulnerable to social consequences on and offline. Mendes et al (2018) also pay heed to the emotional complexity of participating in testimonial-driven hashtag feminist movements like #MeToo and its predecessor, #BeenRapedNeverReported. On one hand, hashtags like the aforementioned engender a massive online collection of publicized testimonials on a platform like Twitter wherein retweeting, replies, likes, and direct messages are read as a comforting sense of solidarity (Mendes et al, 2018). On the other hand, participating involves a highly public retelling of traumatic events and is often emotionally triggering (Mendes et al, 2018). Moreover, there is an often invisible, financially uncompensated form of labour that goes into maintaining social media-driven campaigns that potentially challenge the sustainability of such movements (Mendes et al, 2018). In moving forward, it is critical to note how these invisible forms of emotional vulnerability and labour render some individuals unable or less likely to participate in hashtag activist movements that rely heavily on publicizing personal victimization. In this way, the literature discussing personal testimony inform how #MeToo may unintentionally or intentionally pose barriers to participation for certain women due to the participatory subjectivities it encourages and its subsequent social consequences.

In these ways, while hashtag feminism offers empowering affordances that remediate and scale up the propagation and immediacy of feminist coagulation online, it is imperative to note that "hashtag feminism will not, on its own, eradicate misogyny and other forms of gender violence." (Thrift, 2014, p. 1092). It is key to remember that in utilizing hashtags for feminism, there is potential for both mediated toxicity, re-creations of global relations of dominance, as well as emotional barriers to participation.

Intersectional Digital Feminism

The diversity of voices that can be expressed through the affordances of hashtag feminism does not mean that every discourse facilitated by a hashtag has a holistic perspective on women's lived experiences. Scholars like Daniels (2016), Loza (2014) and Williams (2015) problematize the often white, cis-gendered, able-bodied, economically privileged, heterosexual archetype of women that is often propagated as the standardized norm in hashtag feminist discourses. Daniels (2016), Loza (2014), and Williams (2016) make note of how women of color's (WOC) experiences of sexualized violence are often trivialized and ignored. Conley (2014) and Williams (2016) argues that hashtag feminism is a way for WOC and gender nonconforming women to call attention to their victimhood despite its delegitimization in traditional media. Thelandersson (2014) and Williams (2015), however, also highlight that when WOC do point out the ways their experiences are not taken as seriously, they are often characterized as diverging the unified voice of feminism such that critical interrogations of racism are framed as running counter to interrogations of sexism. In contrast, Rentschler (2017) highlights the productive potential of the hashtag feminist work done by women of colour. Rentschler (2017) makes note of how new modes of witnessing and validating racialized and sexualized violence are engendering care-centered transformative justice-focused discourses that move hashtag conversations toward activist pedagogy and the victim's healing. In a similar vein, Loza (2014) notes several hashtags like #FastTailedGirls and #EconomicViolence that give space for intersectional conversations about sexist oppression, racialization, economic disenfranchisement and etc. In this way, scholarship is mindful how hashtag feminism is not without its contentions along intersectional divisions. Literature emphasizes how women of color's experiences are often not given equal space in digital spheres despite the affordances of hashtag feminist movements. Scholarship also agrees that a lack of intersectional interrogations in hashtag feminist movements or the unfavourable responses that

intersectional perspectives receive when they are brought up are some of the limitations of hashtag feminism as a mode of political engagement. However, scholarship in the field does also make note of the unique productive potential of intersectional hashtag feminist spaces made by women of different social locations.

Literature on the intersectionality of hashtag feminism generally have an almost exclusive focus on race and the ways racialized experiences of sexism are often trivialized or rendered invisible. In doing so, the scholarship renders invisible the multiplicity of other avenues of oppression that are extant in the lived experiences of many women. There are authors like Loza (2014) and Williams (2016) who discuss the ways hashtags were employed to discuss economic privilege, ableism, and gender non-conformity. However, research with an explicit focus on the ways women of diverse identities beyond race participate in mainstream hashtags like #MeToo to stake a claim in shared experiences of oppression is decidedly missing from this field of scholarship. This study of #MeToo will attempt to fill this gap in a way that is mindful of what is lost when intersectionality is conceptualized as women of color challenging the white woman standard.

Sociotechnical Critique of Digital Platforms

Affordances is a term used in multiple disciplines to describe the ways architectural features shape actions that are possible as well as impossible (Bucher & Helmond, 2017). In the study of how digital platforms facilitate discourses, it is imperative to be mindful of how affordances enable certain actions while delimiting others. In the context of this study, while digital platforms have many of the affordances that augment the potential for community building, consciousness-raising, and activist organization, the same affordances can exercise invisible power in shaping the discourses the platform facilitates. Therefore, scholarship that offer sociotechnical

critiques of social media platforms inform how Twitter explicitly and implicitly exercises power over its users and the discursive elements of #MeToo. Building on this literature, my research asks important questions about the relationship between the sociotechnical practices of social media and feminist activism – a relationship that has not been fully explored in relation to #MeToo and sexual violence more broadly.

Commercial Imperatives

In critiquing how social media, like Twitter, exercise power over the discourses they facilitate and the users that create and maintain these discourses, it is imperative to understand how these platforms stand to financially benefit from doing so. In analyzing the commercial imperatives of Twitter, Busch and Shepherd (2014) contend that because Twitter is often a public space for political conversations, the control that platforms exercise over their users are of especial concern for their influence on how citizens engage with their civic rights and democratic discourse. Gillespie (2010) contends that platforms stand to benefit from being understood as neutral facilitators of content such that they best negotiate the opposing agendas of their users who seek to be heard and advertisers who seek targeted audiences. Busch and Shepherd (2014) take it one step further by discussing the ways platforms like Twitter utilize corporate social responsibility strategies to construct benevolent, rather than simply neutral, public images. These public images, according to Busch and Shepherd (2014) are constructed such that Twitter is seen as a service for augmenting democratic discussion rather than a business that profits off of directing targeted audiences to strategically displayed advertisements.

While the marketing function of social media platforms financially benefit the platform, users are rarely in a position to share in this advertisement revenue or refute their subject position as ad-viewers (Fuchs, 2009; Gillespie, 2010). This exploitation and commodification of platform

users, otherwise called surveillance capitalism according to Fuchs (2009), Shepherd (2014), and Zuboff (2015) is done through the careful surveillance and segregation of users into constructed groups based on demographics and consumption habits. Shepherd (2014) and Zuboff (2015) argue that these commodification processes are productive not only of user profiles, but also of user behaviour that is subtly manipulated through the advertisements they are privy to. Additionally, Gillespie (2014) notes that the presentation of content on social media is such that the distinction between user-generated content and commercial content is increasingly blurred. Literature on the economic imperative of social platforms agree that the subtle commodification of platform content is pervasive and unavoidable. This perspective on how platforms accrue advertisement revenue and are motivated to maintain its guise of political neutrality and social benevolence critically informs investigations of how discourses on politically contentious social issues can be covertly moderated or censored. In the context of #MeToo, a movement that seeks to subvert the power dynamics of patriarchy and rape culture, a sociotechnical critique of the ways their subversive potential is limited by the platform's economic motivations is essential.

Social Media Publics

Literature on feminist digital media focus on the importance of the social networks built through hashtag feminism and the ways this community of solidarity is a valid feminist act. Therefore, the ways in which the technical landscape of these discourses influence the sociality of #MeToo participants is essential. danah boyd (2010) provides a critical term to conceptualize social groups on social media platforms: "networked publics". Networked publics for boyd (2010) are publics whose interactive behaviour is influenced, but not dictated by, the technological architecture and affordances of the platform. In their investigation of how users reacted to changes in Twitter's communicative features, Bucher and Helmond (2017) further boyd's (2010) idea by

demonstrating how platform architectures determine what sort of communication and meaning-making is possible and privileged. In a similar vein, Gibbs et al. (2014) coins the term "platform vernacular" to conceptualize the communicative user conventions on each social media platform that arises out of both the technological affordances of the platform as well as the users' popularized ways of utilizing said affordances. In considering how algorithms influence networked publics, Gillespie (2014) argues that when algorithms construct groups via their calculations of who is pertinent to know and listen to, the algorithm engender publics whose sense of self is determined by algorithmic logic. Similarly, Bruns and Burgess (2011) argue that communities built around hashtags on Twitter are an example of both ad hoc and algorithmically calculated groups. However, Bruns and Burgess (2011) also acknowledge the agency of such groups in self-policing of relevant content and who is worth listening to. In these ways, the social practices and communicability of publics constructed through platform engagement demonstrates an entangled interaction of both user agency and platform control. In this way, the social elements of #MeToo's discourse must be investigated with an understanding of the active role that platforms have in shaping them. However, it is essential to stress that due to the intertextuality of hashtag feminist movements that create modes of connection and communication beyond one platform, a sociotechnical critique of Twitter is not deterministic of how feminists cultivate networks of solidarity on the platform.

Algorithmic Logic

Algorithms are one of the specific structural features of social media platforms that receive critical attention by scholars for its influence on user behaviour. Algorithms operate covertly to maintain a guise of the platform's value-neutrality and influence behaviour in ways that are not easily comprehensible for those not privy to specialized technical knowledge (Gillespie, 2014;

Pariser; 2011). In specifically considering Twitter and the algorithms that determine what is "trending", Gillespie (2014) contends that the criteria by which tweets are considered trending are only described vaguely such that any changes made go uncontested. Similarly, Bruns and Burgess (2011) point out that the search function of Twitter generates "top tweets" that are deemed to be the most authoritative or relevant to a topic but that the mechanisms by which the platform ranks some tweets over others is generally unknown. Furthermore, Pariser (2011) and Rainie and Anderson (2017) assert that relevancy algorithms create "filter bubbles" in which only content that normatively agrees with the user is presented to them. Pariser (2011) contends that these filter bubbles undermine the sharing of diverse perspectives and informed political engagement. Additionally, Gillespie (2014) highlights that because of the invisibility of what algorithms exclude, they give users the impression that all that can be known about a topic is presented to them. As such, scholars like Rainie and Anderson (2017) and Sandvig et al (2016) assert that the need for algorithmic literacy, oversight, and ethics is growing. Interrogating the ways algorithms can shape the discursive characteristics of discourses facilitated on platforms like Twitter is essential. Without certainty that algorithms are not moderating content, in investigating #MeToo's discourses, any conclusions drawn must be mindful of how what is known is potentially partial and algorithmically filtered.

Platformed Hate Speech

Some sociotechnical research elucidates the ways social media platforms recreate and often exaggerate social inequalities and discrimination extant IRL. For example, researchers like Matamoros-Fernandez (2017), Shepherd et al (2015), and Bivens (2015) investigate the ways the structural features of social media platforms engender, maintain, and amplify social discrimination and hateful discourse. These scholars challenge the optimism of the early internet age that

presumed digitally mediated interactions would be more equal and democratic (Shepherd et al, 2015). Shepherd et al (2015) make note of how the hashtag, while it can be used for political engagement, can just as easily be utilized as a vehicle to disseminate hate towards those of non-privileged social location. On a similar note, Matamoros-Fernandez (2017) introduces the term "platformed racism" to denote how racist discourses are manufactured and amplified by both the platform's affordances and the ways users utilize them (p.931). Similarly, Bivens (2015) argues that the deeply embedded normative logic of the platform discriminates, segregates, and exercises often invisible hegemonic force through software programming even when platforms seemingly have affordances that reflect an appreciation for social difference. Matamoros-Fernandez (2017) emphasizes that in addition to the ways software and affordances can disadvantage certain social groups online, the inconsistency and obscurity of how platform owners respond to and sanction hate speech online make certain platforms a far less welcoming space for particular communities. Because this study will investigate how varying social inequalities are reflected in the discourses of #MeToo, it is imperative to note how people of different social locations are differently vulnerable to digitally mediated social inequality. Scholars that offer sociotechnical critiques of social media platforms mirror the concerns that digital feminist researchers expressed about hate online, while adding to it a discussion of how the regulation and structure of the platform can actually implicitly encourage discrimination.

This literature review has highlighted the ways in which social media platforms can be utilized to further feminist agendas of community building, consciousness-raising, and citizen action. However, these same platforms and affordances exercise control over user sociality in covert ways for economic incentive and recreate social exclusion and discrimination extant offline. In moving forward with an analysis of how #MeToo operates as an online feminist discourse that potentially recreates or ignores social inequality, the literature in both fields of digital feminist

media and sociotechnical critiques will situate my own research and inform the conclusions drawn from this study.

Chapter Three: Results and Discussion

While #MeToo is often touted for its accessibility and inclusivity, a detailed critical discourse analysis tells another story. In this chapter, I will discuss my findings using specific tweets and patterns found from my analysis. First, I will discuss the ways #MeToo demonstrated a re-creation of American cultural imperialism in online discussions of gendered violence. Following this, I will discuss the ways intersectional representations that take account of race, gender, class, ability, sexuality, and other identities were largely reductive and exclusive in the discourses of #MeToo. Finally, I will address how the affordances of Twitter shape and moderate the politically subversive discussions it facilitates online.

By Americans, for Americans

Throughout the #MeToo sample analyzed for this project, one of the most evident themes that emerged was that of predominantly American Twitter users tweeting about American political and cultural events for American audiences or those with American cultural literacy. This assumed literacy of American culture or rather the lack of concern or self-reflexivity with how exclusive this convention made #MeToo conversations is one of the first limitations I would like to highlight about the subversive potential of this hashtag. Due to the centrality of American culture, politics, and most importantly, how Americans experience sexual violence, the discourses of #MeToo were far removed from the reality of those not familiar with American ways of life. In this way, #MeToo's wide-reaching subversive cultural impact is seriously called into question. This American dominance is exemplified by the user profiles that revealed that 43 users out of the 100 tweets analyzed for this study resided in the U.S. Even Twitter users who indicated being residents of different countries were from predominantly English-speaking nations like Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia who would easily have access to understanding U.S. language and culture

and be comfortable making comments on U.S.-based current events. To this point, 57 tweets of the 100 analyzed tweets were those commenting on U.S. politics or political figures, U.S. media outlets like NBC news, FOX news, TMZ, and *USA Today*, and/or Hollywood celebrities.

The centrality that U.S.-politics took in the #MeToo discourse often detracted focus away from the experiences of assault survivors and instead focused on using allegations of sexual misconduct to discredit powerful men in U.S. politics along bipartisan lines. For example, one of the most retweeted tweets in the sample was that of Hollywood actress Alyssa Milano's tweet about U.S. president Donald Trump's many sexual assault allegations. As shown below in Figure 1, this tweet received nearly 7000 retweets in the time period analyzed for this study and was the most retweeted tweet in my sample.

Figure 1. **Milano's tweet on trump's sexual misconduct allegations.**

The high degree of engagement with this tweet demonstrates both Milano's celebrity status and the predominance of American politics in #MeToo's discourse. In addition to tweets calling for Trump's indictment, tweets concerning the sexual assault allegations of other U.S. politicians like Roy Moore and Alan Franken were also heavily featured in the discourse. The problem with these discussions was how these allegations were used as a means of discrediting politicians according to American bipartisan politics. For example, shown below are two tweets who both use

sexual misconduct allegations against U.S. politicians of both the Republican and Democratic party as justification for their political alignment.

Figure 2. **Bipartisan tweets about sexual assault allegations made against U.S. politicians.**

In this way, #MeToo's focus on American president Donald Trump's sexual assault allegations and other U.S. politicians demonstrates two features of this hashtag. First, hashtag feminism enables everyday Twitter users to openly express their personal outrage towards men in leadership and it facilitates discussions around the political implications of sexual misconduct. In

other words, #MeToo facilitates an online space for discussing the affective responses to politicized issues with little obvious censure.

Second, #MeToo largely reflects the bipartisan politics of the United States and this detracts attention away from survivors and their experiences. It was evident that discussions of sexual assault allegations were largely shaped by the discursive constructions of Republicans vs. Democrats in U.S. politics and this influenced the ways people made meaning of these allegations. The ways in which #MeToo's subversion of rape culture was being lost in American party politics was an issue that was brought up in the discourse, though rarely. One tweet in the sample linked an article that discussed the ways bi-partisan U.S.-politics erased the experiences of survivors and the prevalence of violent men in power regardless of their political alignment. Shown below is the article that was linked about women accusing Donald Trump of sexual misconduct expressing their concerns of being forgotten after they were used as a political weapon against Trump when he was a Republican candidate for the 2016 presidential elections.

Figure 3. **Article discussing women who accused Trump of sexual misconduct.**

While this discussion illustrated the potential for #MeToo to facilitate conversations that go beyond bipartisan politics, it also demonstrates that much of the pervasiveness and nuance of sexual violence in the world and even in America is lost when sexual assault allegations are used

as a tool for political mudslinging. This discursive conflict demonstrates the ways discourse operates as both a function of dominance, in this case, Americanized bipartisan politicization of sexual misconduct, and of resistance by refocusing on the experiences of survivors regardless of party politics.

Furthermore, I argue that to focus #MeToo on Hollywood was to Americanize it from its inception. The movement first going viral in discussing the pervasiveness of sexual violence in Hollywood, the longest arm of American cultural imperialism on the global stage, makes the U.S.-centrality of #MeToo unsurprising. This is despite Tarana Burke's initial intent with the Me Too Movement. The amplified voice that was afforded to Hollywood celebrities played a key role in perpetuating the Americanization of the discourse. As alluded to earlier, American celebrities such as Bette Midler and Alyssa Milano and their stories and testimonies were by far the most heard and engaged with Tweets, generating thousands of 'likes' and retweets. While showcasing how socially and economically privileged women can be vulnerable to sexual assault potentially highlights the far-reaching pervasiveness of gendered violence, the continued focus on the most privileged survivors erases the ways others are uniquely more vulnerable. In America between 2005-2010, women in households with less than $25,000 of income experienced the highest rates of sexual violence than any other income bracket (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2013). #MeToo's focus on celebrities occupying high socioeconomic positions in society who experience sexual violence does not reflect this reality. While the experiences of socially privileged women are as valid as those who are not, an almost exclusive focus on Hollywood starlets erases the classist, racialized, homophobic, and heterosexist nature of sexual violence in the world and in America. This narrow focus of #MeToo constructed the experiences of celebrities as the dominant discourse while subjugating all other ways of understanding vulnerability as less worthy of attention. While

#MeToo may prompt participants to offer their voices for a unified narrative against gendered violence, what is clear is that this voice is predominantly that of American celebrities.

Another illustration of the extent to which American concerns dominated the discussion of #MeToo was the degree to which *Time Magazine's* Person of the Year was discussed online. Trump being one of the nominees, the preliminary *Time* Person of the Year nomination list was met with backlash as many suggested that #MeToo should receive the honour. Tweets expressing statements like "Just my opinion but I believe the #PersonOfTheYear should be #MeToo. This would recognize the bravery of millions!" were frequent throughout the discourse (@makeupsue, 2017). It was apparent that recognition by an American media outlet that rewards a title based on Americanized standards was discursively constructed to be important. While the high incidence of discussing the *Time*'s Person of the Year could be due to the cross-sectional design of the tweets analyzed, I argue that this is yet another example that #MeToo, like other hashtag feminist movements, most readily engage western audiences and privilege American cultural literacy (Higgs, 2015; Khoja-Moolji, 2015). Additionally, I argue that this focus on *Time Magazine* also exemplifies the prominent role of celebrity in this discourse. In this way, assuming an American audience, framing allegations against politicians in bipartisan terms, and discussing *Time Magazine's* Person of the Year were all ways that #MeToo's discourses were constructed in such a way that the discourse relegated significant amounts of discursive power to its American participants. Through its thorough Americanization, #MeToo was not only a hashtag feminist movement but also an outcome of a particular form of cultural imperialism.

It should be noted that by Americanization in the context of analyzing #MeToo, I am specifically referring to White Americanization. To this point, when I use the term Americanization in my analysis, I am referring to the establishment of white, middle- and upper-class experiences as the dominant discourse with which to understand sexual violence regardless

of the actual demographic distribution of the country. Through this specific brand of American cultural imperialism, one of the most notable outcomes was that of how race is conceptualized and discursively constructed in #MeToo. Discussions of race were discursively framed within a the white-black binary popular in America, Person of Colour (POC) came to signify an African American person, and intersectionality was reduced to mean including the perspectives of how African Americans are differently vulnerable to gendered violence. As McLaren (2002) argues, the areas of life that are discussed are also the areas of life that are discursively constructed and controlled. In this way, the Americanized discourses of #MeToo worked to construct, control, and subsequently limit the subversive value of considering race when discussing sexual violence. Furthermore, even with an emphasis on blackness as an antithesis to the established white privileged norm, perspectives of African American women were, to echo Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), marginal at best. This is further discussed below in how intersectionality or lack thereof complicated this discourse.

Intersectional Invisibility

Figure 4. **Tweets illustrating Burke vs. Milano recognition for #MeToo.**

These tweets are not part of the data set that was formally analyzed for this project, but they are images of the first two tweets that appear when one looks up #MeToo on Twitter when data collection for this project started in December 2018. The above tweets highlight a key tension that has structured the #MeToo conversation between Burke's Me Too movement and the way in which the hashtag gained virality through Milano's celebrity. The tweets above speak to how marginal the recognition of Tarana Burke's contributions are to #MeToo compared to that of Hollywood starlets like Milano. Burke being a woman of colour, her disenfranchisement from being recognized as the creator of the Me Too Movement speaks volumes to the ways race relations and intersectionality more broadly were erased with this hashtag. As shown in the image below, erasures of Burke as the creator of the Me Too Movement were considered to be part of the systemic erasure of Black women from broader discussion around sexual violence.

Figure 5. **Tweet discussing *Time Magazine's* failure to acknowledge Burke.**

As alluded to above, representations of race as well as other intersections of identity and social vulnerability were limited in the discourses of #MeToo. Conley (2014) and Williams (2016) argue that hashtag feminism is a way for women of colour and gender nonconforming women to call attention to intersectionality despite its relegation to the margins in traditional media. To this point, some tweets in the sample shared links to articles discussing the varied reception that women of colour receive when they participated in #MeToo. Below is an image of an article by Lulu Garcia-Navarro (2017) published in National Public Radio that was retweeted in the sample.
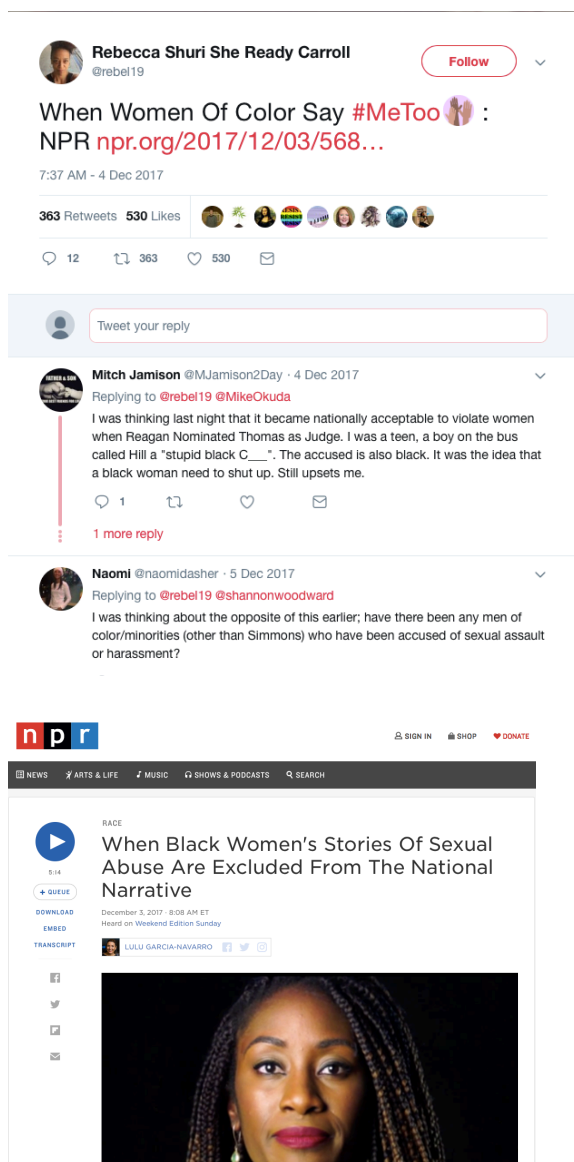
Figure 6. **Tweet and article discussing women of colour's experiences with #MeToo.**

While the above tweet did receive a significant amount of positive engagement on Twitter with 363 retweets and 530 'likes', as well as generate some discussion about race with 12 comments, the degree of engagement is considerably less than that of white celebrities, U.S. politicians, and mainstream American news outlets. This disparity in engagement between tweets that interrogate race with #MeToo and those that affirm #MeToo's normalization of white celebrity spokespeople against sexual violence exemplify the degree of subjugation that non-white conceptualizations of sexual violence had in this discourse. Furthermore, non-heterosexual, non-

cis-gendered, non-affluent, and non-abled-bodied qualifications to discussions of sexual violence were completely missing and thus rendered invisible. To clarify, the qualitatively different relationships women of colour have with gendered violence is not completely absent from the discursive consciousness of #MeToo. Rather, the disparity in engagement and the rarity of tweets discussing intersectional considerations on #MeToo demonstrate the twofold problem with intersectionality and this hashtag.

First, the tweets discussing race, or any other dimension of social disadvantage were anomalies to the mainstream narrative of #MeToo; tweets concerning the unique experiences of racialized women and sexualized violence were interruptions to the dominant discourse. While accruing positive feedback and responded to in the affirmative, tweets that explicitly critiqued the ways the unified voice of #MeToo privileged white celebrities were rare. In contrast, the exponentially greater positive engagement that celebrity tweets received were anything but rare. The implicit message of this uneven representation of experiences is such that the victimization of privileged white women is worthier of discussion than that of women of color. However, these interruptions do demonstrate a potential for complication and sophistication of the dominant discourse.

Second, intersectionality in #MeToo was reduced to considering the experiences of racialized women as a counter to the discursively normalized #MeToo contributors, privileged white women who often have audiences both online and off. Rather than nuanced considerations of intersectionality as varying avenues of privilege and social disadvantage to further discussions of ally-ship and community building, intersectionality was largely framed as white women's experiences being contrasted by the experiences of Black women. I should also note here again that when women of color were discussed in #MeToo it was almost always in reference to Black women in America. In this way, in discussing intersectionality as reducible to racializing white

women's experiences, discursive constructions of intersectionality were effectively disempowered from having the analytical benefits of understanding vulnerability to sexual violence as simultaneous, complex, irreducible, and inclusive (Carasathis, 2014).

Furthermore, discussions of race were often initiated by women of colour, demonstrating an uneven responsibility of these women to complicate feminist discussions with little considerations for ally-ship across social boundaries. In analyzing the profiles of users that tweeted about race in #MeToo, it was evident that only African American women and men tweeted about racializing discussions of sexual violence. For example, shown below is an image of the two out of four users that discussed race using #MeToo.


Figure 7. **Two profiles of Twitter users who drew attention to racialized discussions of sexual violence.**

It is important to note that a significant limitation of this study was its reliance on reading race off the body, in this case, off the profiles of Twitter users. While this is a problematic practice, for this study, it did reveal that people of colour, specifically Black women, were predominantly the only people discussing race through #MeToo. This vernacular practice on Twitter unevenly responsibilized women of colour to self-advocate for the importance of complicating an oversimplified discourse around gendered violence. Moreover, this discursive norm is also

problematic for the scant consideration it gives for the greater degrees of social vulnerability that women of colour and by extension, non-cis-gendered women, differently-abled women and beyond face offline if they were to speak against sexual violence publicly. In this way, this reliance on women occupying vulnerable social positions to critique dominant discourses unevenly burdens those already more vulnerable offline. Furthermore, what could have been a space for discussing the workings of ally-ship in which women of different social positions share vigilance and advocate for one another, devolved into Black women qualifying the discussions of white women.

The reliance on women of colour to qualify a reductive dominant discourse also reveals one of the main issues of a movement against sexual violence that relies on personal testimony. As Myles (2018) highlights in his analysis of hashtag activism, reliance on self-disclosure of sexual assault potentially makes individuals who participate online more vulnerable to social repercussions offline. This reliance on personal testimony entraps individuals into the double bind of being complacent in their oppression if they refrain from participating but also more vulnerable in real life if they were to come forward on a public online platform (Myles, 2018). This effect is exacerbated for women in more vulnerable position than that of Hollywood celebrities. The phrase 'Me Too' itself potentially positions those who participate online as self-disclosing their status as sexual assault survivors. This sort of reliance of self-disclosure thus begs the question of whether this conversation truly reflects the pervasiveness of sexual violence and whether it is actually accessible to the most vulnerable. It should be noted that while explicit personal testimonies disclosing actual narratives of sexual assault, like the one shown below, were certainly a part of a few tweets in the sample, most tweets were people commenting on US current events. Thus, using this hashtag to discuss the particularities of politics may actually work as a protective measure in drawing less attention to the vulnerabilities of individual women through self-disclosure and more attention to the voice these women have in being engaged with politics and current events.
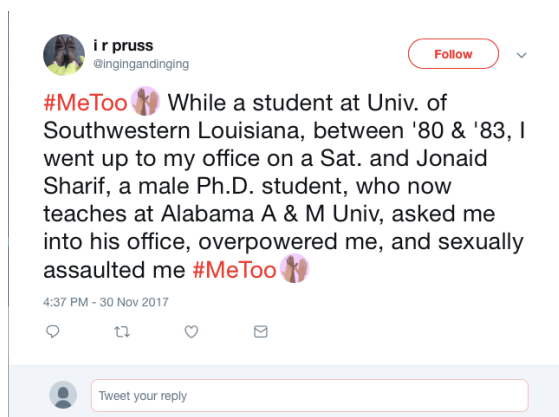
Figure 8. **Tweet sharing a personal narrative of sexual assault.**

In considering their rarity in the sample analyzed, I question the efficacy of #MeToo in engendering affectively-driven conversations around politicized narratives. #MeToo is popularly understood as focused around personal narratives of sexual assault by survivors sharing their stories by asserting narrative control over an oft-politicized and depersonalized conceptualization of sexual violence. In reality, while the virality of the hashtag may have been initiated through the sharing of personal testimony, the sample analyzed reveals a different story. The lack of personal testimony on Twitter may reflect a response to this unequal burden of vulnerability placed on already vulnerable women and suggests the need to examine the affordances of Twitter, which implicitly encourage abridged quips and comments rather than long-form personal narratives.

Feminism on Twitter

A significant point of consideration for this analysis was the role that Twitter played in shaping and filtering the #MeToo discourse. Twitter describes itself as "what's happening in the world and what people are talking about" (About Twitter, n.d.). However, the image below of what stories are included on their featured page underneath their "what's happening in the world' tagline reveals that Twitter predominantly reflects what's happening in America and what privileged Americans are talking about.
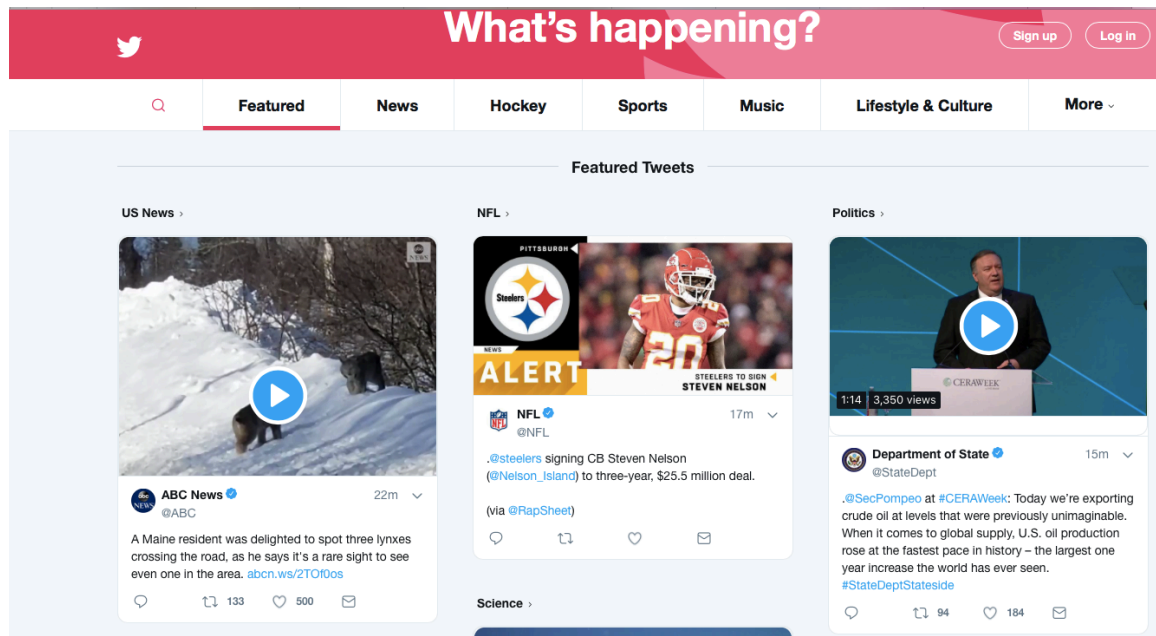
Figure 9. **Image of the stories featured on Twitter's main page.**

In the case of #MeToo, Twitter reflects the sexual victimization of socially and economically privileged women with little intersectional exceptions. To this point, Twitter valorizes social media clout through its verification policies in which accounts that have been deemed to be of greater public interest (i.e. celebrity accounts and official news media accounts) become verified, giving the account a greater amount of cultural capital. In the context of digital feminist activism, this practice involves the amplification of contributions made by verified accounts while subjugating those that do not have that marker. Twitter administration distances themselves from the ethical and political implications of verifying accounts through their subjective evaluation of an account being of public interest by stating that "A verified badge does not imply any endorsement by Twitter" (The Twitter Rules, 2019). In this way, Twitter stands to gain from the high levels of cultural influence the conversations happening on its platforms garner without acknowledging their role in technologically subjugating some while privileging others.

The skewed showcasing of content and subsequent amplification of certain voices over others is especially problematic in the context of examining discursive online activism and the

positive public image that platforms gain from their facilitation. While platforms like Twitter commercially gain from their benevolent public images as services that augment democratic discussion, algorithmic and regulatory opacity in the operation of the platform ensures that little holds them accountable to actually acting in accordance to their public image (Busch & Shepherd, 2014). Tweets such as the one shown below exemplify how Twitter's public reputation as an online platform and a celebration of the subversive potential of the Me Too Movement become conflated.

Figure 10. **Tweet by Twitter celebrating #MeToo's recognition in** *Time Magazine*

Furthermore, while Twitter can congratulate itself for facilitating an inclusive 'global' discussion, it also equally enables widespread hate comments to become shared in the same discussions. Twitter describes itself as a neutral platform for individuals to contribute to and discover the current events of the world with little filtering and moderation (Gillespie, 2010). I argue that this guise of platform neutrality in the face of injustice, hate speech, and propagation of violent messages is unjust, complacent, and obfuscates the degree of platformed hate proliferating on Twitter (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2017). My analysis of #MeToo tweets revealed that Twitter provides a platform for both feminist activists and hate comments made by those against #MeToo. One tweet read "the sisters of a cuntstampede [sic] got offended and she lost her livelyhood [sic] that is not feminism" (@IZINKITBA, 2017). This tweet like the many other comments that were

left in response to #MeToo exemplify how feminism on Twitter is often met by derogatory comments. To echo Shepherd et al (2015) and Mendes et al (2018), the hashtag can be used for both democratic engagement in political discourse and for directing and propagating hate comments.

Twitter's policies seemingly address these concerns regarding the platform's potential complacency. However, these policies work to obfuscate the agency Twitter has in managing its public image by articulating policies against hate all the while not being held accountable to these policies. Twitter's Hateful Conduct Policy outlines that any promotions of violence against those on the "basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, religious affiliation, age, disability, or serious disease is prohibited and will be met with reprimanding" and outlines the consequences of such online behaviour as ranging from removal of policy-violating content to permanent suspension of the account (Twitter, n.d.). It is unclear how these violations are deemed violations, by whom, and how their most severe consequence of permanently suspending accounts is enacted.

To this point it should be noted that a handful of accounts in my sample were suspended. In analyzing the tweets in the sample attached to the suspended accounts, it was unclear why some accounts were suspended while others remained intact despite violating Twitters hateful conduct policy; there was evident variability in Twitter's application of the policies it articulated. This variability is likely due to Twitter's reliance on user's flagging hateful content that then goes to Twitter for review as to whether it meets their threshold for abusive content to maintain their guise of neutrality. Moreover, this reliance on individual user's flagging offensive content also speaks to the degree of American cultural values (i.e. the privileging of free speech) that are embedded in the policies and architecture of Twitter, an American corporation. Additionally, the language of their rules and policies provide a guise of little subjective interpretation to enforcing these rules

which obfuscates the degree of agency that Twitter exercises in setting these standards. The political alignment of Twitter, while often positioned as neutral, is of increasing importance as we recognize both the extent to which politically subversive conversations are being facilitated by the platform and the degree of agency that Twitter has in indiscriminately filtering and shaping these conversations based on their own agenda, commercial or otherwise (Gillespie, 2014).

To expand upon the point of commercial gain, advertisements on Twitter also garner heavier online traffic when movements like #MeToo go viral. The Twitter Ads page (n.d.) has a by line that reads, "hundreds of millions of people turn to Twitter to discover what's happening the world. Twitter ads can help you connect with this audience and get meaningful results." The quote suggests that Twitter is well aware of the news outlet function it has for its users to "discover what's happening in the world" and unabashedly conflates this function with that of garnering ad revenue (Twitter, n.d.). In this way, Twitter commodifies online discursive activism such that the more people log onto the platform to participate in the feminist discussions of #MeToo, the larger the audiences the advertisements on Twitter have.

The aforementioned commercial motives of Twitter do not take away completely from the subversive potential of #MeToo but other concerns call into question whether Twitter is a reliable means of feminist activism. Clarke (2016) noted the archival logic of feminist activism on Twitter that engendered a solidarity-building collection of feminist voices and accounts. In contrast, my analysis of #MeToo posed some doubts on how reliable and easily navigate-able an archive a hashtag actually enables on Twitter. First, Twitter deletes many of the old tweets that are made on its platform unless they somehow maintain virality long after its initial publication. Furthermore, this process of being a working but incomplete archive is shrouded in the same algorithmic opacity as Twitter's moderation of hate comments. While participation may create a sense of community-building and consciousness-raising, all valid and important feminist projects, the extent to which

Twitter functions as a living, real-time archive that users can revisit, study, connect through, and reflect upon demonstrates little efficacy.

Regarding #MeToo's potential to engender community, Twitter's ability to cultivate networked publics around feminist activism is indubitable. boyd (2010) contends that networked publics emerge as a by-product of both a network's affordances and people's navigation of these technological architectures. Similarly, I argue that while archives on Twitter remain unreliable and the degree of inclusivity of these online publics are contentious, communities of women discussing their own and each other's experiences of sexual violence did emerge around #MeToo. As shown in the image below, themes of connection, unified solidarity, and cultural progress through collective action were prevalent in the Twitter discourses of #MeToo as well as a celebration of social media affordances that enabled this community-building.

Figure 11. **Tweet by Alyssa Milano celebrating the ways women were brought together through #MeToo.**

Furthermore, the efficacy of Twitter as a platform for thoughtfully qualified political debates has its limitations but I argue that it is not completely devoid of political potential. Twitter conversations that occur through various replies and retweets is such that tracing the lineage and progress of conversations and who is replying to who or about what current event is difficult to do retrospectively. My analysis also parallels the concerns of Higgs (2015) and Thelandersson (2014) who both note the character limit of tweets on Twitter that limit the potential for constructive,

appropriately qualified arguments and debates. In contrast, the responses made to novel allegations against Trump and other U.S. politicians through #MeToo illustrates how instrumental a tweet's ephemerality and subsequent 'response-ability' are for feminist interruptions of mainstream news coverage (Rentschler, 2014). While it may not completely democratize access to political commentary, Twitter does enable everyday people to have a voice in critically engaging with current events and discussing with others. To echo Rentschler and Thrift's (2015) argument, the ephemera of the internet are especially instrumental in interrupting hegemonic perpetuations of rape culture in real-time. Additionally, the vernacular practice of linking longer articles to express one's political arguments as well as the intertextual expansion of #MeToo beyond the Twittersphere may mitigate this discursive limitation of character limits. As Myles (2018) highlighted in his analysis, the intertextuality of hashtag movements augments the conversations happening online such that the movement raises consciousness beyond the online realm.

In summary, Twitter's feminism decidedly leaves something to be desired; that something being technological transparency and accountability, a rejection of 'neutrality' in the face of injustice, and a separation of news and advertisement functions. However, one of the most notable and imperative functions that #MeToo has done was to be a highly public feminist interruption of mainstream narratives of sexual assault that was timely and widely unified thanks to Twitter. By circumventing the mainstream media, the implicit assumptions of rape culture (victim-blaming, gendered expectations, and excusing of sexual violence) were collectively called into question. While the Americanization and lack of nuanced intersectional discussion potentially recreate oppressive conventions of understanding rape culture and sexual violence, and demonstrate the polyvalence of discourses, valid and significant feminist strides to cultivate communities, raise consciousness, and foster solidarity and critical engagement were achieved through #MeToo.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

This thesis has critically interrogated the ways that digital activist movements like #MeToo have the potential to contribute to feminist projects of fostering solidarity and community as well as the potential to exclude, marginalize, and further the commercial interests of an American corporation. The Me Too movement, from initially being conceived of by Tarana Burke to its Twitter virality a decade later, has evolved as a feminist movement through time. This analysis sought to offer critical insight into the inner workings of the #MeToo discourse as facilitated on Twitter to tease out how domination was both resisted and recreated, and how mediating platforms position themselves to gain from digital activism. As both a sexual assault survivor and a queer, woman of colour unable to parse out the ways in which one intersection of my identity leave me more vulnerable or more ill-represented in mainstream discourses than another, I offer this thesis as a continuation of the digital feminist scholarship happening around hashtag feminism from my unique standpoint. I fully acknowledge that my stake in doing this research has and will colour my critical take of the #MeToo discourses as they continue to manifest both subversion and oppression. My hope in doing this thesis is to engender in others the deeply reflective questions I encountered throughout this process in questioning my own preconceived notions of justice, the essentialism of identity, and the power of accessible forms of activism.

The cross-sectional design of this research poses certain limitations to the generalizability of my critques in regard to understanding the whole of the Me Too movement as it has evolved through time. It is important to note that arguments speaking to the overt Americanization of #MeToo are limited to the confines of the data set investigated as this movement has since gone viral in countries like India, China, and South Korea. My critique of the Americanization also challenges us to conceive of a more inclusive discourse that speaks to a more diverse audience than an assumed American one. Concerns of reductive intersectionality become more pertinent as

this movement truly goes global. Additionally, as alluded to above, this thesis ran into the major limitation of having to read race off the body/profiles of Twitter users during its investigation of intersectional representation in #MeToo. It is my hope that in future research, greater attention is given to the ethical implications of such methods and what adjustments can be made to research design to mitigate this problem. Furthermore, due to the limitations of an undergraduate honour's thesis, other feminist hashtags like #BreakTheSilence that were prominently featured in the data sample were not investigated further. The investigation of the convergence, complication, and augmentation of hashtagged conversations that exists alongside each other in an ecosystem of digital feminist activism is research I hope emerges soon. As highlighted in my literature review, these digital conversations are not happening in isolation of each other. These hashtagged conversations continue the feminist tradition of accessible activism and community and elucidate the ways in which technological affordances like co-current hashtagging, intertextual linking of news articles, and incomplete but real-time archiving can advance these feminist projects.

In investigating the ways celebrity and social media clout played an important role in the digital feminist discourses of #MeToo, my thesis calls for those who have a public platform to take it upon themselves to necessarily complicate, qualify, and focus attention on those do not enjoy the same privileges. In my analysis I proposed an implied trade-off between celebrity inclusion of publicity and inclusive conversations that privilege all equally. This thesis offers fodder for discussing the ways that those of privilege are more responsible to share their platforms, conceive of themselves as equal but different allies in the fight for social equity, and in sharing vigilance for the ways others may be more uniquely vulnerable when participating in so-called 'accessible' means of activism. The aforementioned trade-off is not automatic and ally-ship of women across social locations can help to mitigate this as digital feminism evolves.

This movement has brought sexual assault and gendered violence to the cultural forefront through its virality and use of celebrity clout. However, as a movement that claims global efficacy, #MeToo needs to step up and embrace more, listen more, and do better. Intersectionality should no longer fall to the wayside as a footnote made by a person of colour to an otherwise whitewashed narrative. In conceiving of the evolution of this movement, I challenge digital feminists moving forward to align themselves to a feminism that recognizes the unique ways in which gender is not the only or primary avenue of oppression. My hope for the evolution of digital feminism is that of one that is not tempted to promote a unified voice over a necessarily complex one, and is ready to reimagine ally-ship and community-building along inclusive and diverse terms.

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