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The Effectiveness of Digital Activism: An Analysis of the Controversial #MeToo Movement

In 2005, an interview with a prominent Hollywood celebrity and television host Billy Bush was recorded for Access Hollywood. This banter between the two men, referred to later as “locker room talk,” vulgarly degraded women and objectified them with direct quotes subjected to phrases such as “Grab ‘em by the pussy.” In 2016, this conversational audio tape was released to the American public causing a slew of backlash to erupt regarding the sexual treatment of women in America and the societal acceptance of a culture that tolerates the disrespect, violation, and degradation of woman. Following these tapes, a flood of women came forward to accuse this famous man of sexual assault, and in 2016, this Hollywood star, now associated with a string of sexual assault allegations, Donald J. Trump, was elected the President of the United States. With the outburst of allegations recently coming to light that has been silenced for years, not only subjected to politics, these crippling stories sparked the outbreak and circulation of the #MeToo movement that called into question how prevalent sexual assault is in the United States and what can be done to effectively eradicate this problem. Social media has been an increasingly major factor in the spread of the movement, inviting both men and women alike to participate in the conversation, as well as allowing the scale of the issue to be accurately perceived. Despite the onslaught of backlash emerging from fears of professional losses, false allegations, and the movement’s overreaching excess, social media’s platform for the #MeToo movement has effectively highlighted the widespread number of men and women who finally feel empowered

to vocalize their assault; the movement has also inspired an optimistic wave of change that challenges the patriarchal societal structure and the number of sexual assault cases that go unreported as well as shifting the power dynamic in institutions that will no longer tolerate sexual mistreatment.

The oppression of women within society is not new but rather stems from years of historical oppression placed on women in many societies around the world, preventing the complete equality of women. Sexual violence—an unwanted act of sexual contact forced upon a victim—is a physical expression of oppression stemming from the societal objectification of women that leads to serious psychological damage and trauma (Napikoski and Lewis) and yet despite the serious nature of this violence, men holding prestigious power shamed and silenced these women from speaking up, causing women to severely blame their personal actions and internalize their abuse as a customary, unchangeable occurrence. With the introduction of Title IX in 1972 that banned sex discrimination and raised the profile for sexual harassment (“Title IX and Sex Discrimination”), the conversation began to gain a voice—a voice that would soon realize the strength of its own power and bring the conversation to an unavoidable light. Tarana Burke, a sexual assault activist, founded the #MeToo movement in 2006 to aid sexual assault survivors; it served as a tool of “empowerment through empathy” to show victimized women that they do not stand alone in their experiences but rather are supported by others who say #MeToo. Despite being founded in 2006, the hashtag exploded onto social media and landed widespread media attention in 2017 following the multitude of sexual assault allegations falling on Harvey Weinstein that spanned over a period of decades. These allegations prompted actress Alyssa Milano to tweet the hashtag, inspiring a wave of stories on social media about their sexual assault experiences followed by “#MeToo” (“The woman behind”). In 2018, #MeToo

reemerged in the wake of the Supreme Court nomination of the Republican judge and lawyer Brett Kavanaugh in July that was soon followed by a sexual assault accusation coming from Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, along with two other women (Segers); this caused a political rift in social media and backlash from both sides of the political spectrum with controversial debates and hate among the internet thus ensuing.

Within the first 24 hours of the #MeToo revival on social media, the movement's momentum was an undeniable force within the media, with 12 million women posting their personal sexual assault stories with the hashtag on Facebook alone (Mendes et al.); however, as the amplification of #MeToo continued to grow, both men and women alike became weary of the movement's potential consequences, with many posing the question, "Has the #MeToo movement gone too far?" One top concern for women arose from the fear of decreased professional opportunities due to the unwillingness of men to want to work with them, with a Vox survey illustrating that 60% were very or somewhat concerned with the potential effects on professional careers (North). With men believing that every encounter they have with a woman is heavily examined and scrutinized, they opt for disengaging from these interactions in the workplace before they can occur or be misinterpreted. The overwhelming response by men resembles the analogy that in today's society they are constantly walking on eggshells as to avoid sexual misconduct allegations and misinterpretations of innocent sexual advances on women, prompting some to completely avoid women as a cautionary solution (Bowles). Some even argue that as the spectrum of sexual interactions between women and men are now socially being grouped together with one synonymous hashtag, a social atmosphere is created that paints all women as victims and all men as abusers, ultimately undermining the real victims of sexual assault (Russell).

The concerns for the overreach of the #MeToo movement also extend to women and men's fears of false allegations, with the previously referenced Vox survey additionally demonstrating that 63% of women polled were very or somewhat concerned about false reports (North). The medialization of sexual assault allegations that spark public engagement almost immediately worry men in respect to a false or fabricated allegation constituting the complete destruction of their lives, reputations, and careers that so many powerful men have already experienced. Some argue these accusations can be spitefully used as a mechanism for jealousy or revenge (Mullarkey), while others deem that the movement has transformed into a male-hating witch hunt. Andrew Sullivan, a writer for New York Magazine, expressed that the #MeToo activists "believe they are fighting an insidious, ubiquitous evil—the patriarchy—just as the extreme anti-Communists in the 1950s believed that commies were everywhere and so foul they didn't deserve a presumption of innocence, or simple human decency," (North). The fearful climate arising for men as a result of the #MeToo movement resonates as a personal attack and creates strong feelings of resentment, as men are not normally subjected to questions of their moral or sexual character.

Although these concerns are prominent amongst women in fear for their careers as well as men in their families being harmed as a side effect of #MeToo, the same nationwide survey conducted by Vox last March indicates that overall support of the #MeToo movement outweighed their concerns, with 75% of women believing that the movement would help women report sexual assault and with 69% strongly or somewhat strongly supporting the overall purpose of the movement (North). Regarding men's concerns in the workplace, not all believe avoidance is the solution to harassment but rather view the casting out of women from professional opportunities due to male apprehension as a contributing factor to the systematic problem of

male entitlement (Bowles). The article “Now What?” published by the Harvard Business Review suggests that the overwhelming bolster of support for the movement that constitutes a decreased tolerance for sexual harassment can actually benefit both men and women in their professional careers (Williams). In the study “#HowIWillChange: Engaging Men and Boys in the #MeToo Movement,” prior research reveals that “men often feel anxious about intervening or speaking up about violence against women due to fears of being perceived as “weak” or “gay” by their male peers” (Pettyjohn et al.), yet since the #MeToo movement has dramatically altered the public perception of sexual harassment, the Harvard Business Review reports that 77% of men say that they are more inclined to speak up if they witness the unjust treatment of women following the #MeToo movement (Williams), promising a future that optimistically strives to rewrite the societal view of sexual misconduct and believes in the voices of women.

While the believability of women has progressed tremendously from past views of females as hysterical, unreliable sources of information, false allegations and overreach, as previously explained, are still rampant critiques of the movement. However, statistics released by the National Sexual Violence Defense Resource Center unveil that while one in five women will be raped in their lifetime, 63% of sexual assaults go unreported and of assault cases actually reported, only between 2 and 10% are false reports (“Get Statistics”). The criticism by those, like Andrew Sullivan, who feel the #MeToo movement has adopted a mentality resembling a rampant witch hunt or McCarthyism worries David Perry, an author for Pacific Standard, who expresses in his article “No, #MeToo is Not a Witch Hunt,” that these historical metaphors are an attempt to undermine the #MeToo movement that is not a persecution but rather a revolt against persecution. He writes, “The #MeToo movement is not a witch hunt...It's not like the Holocaust, Japanese Internment, McCarthyism, or the Inquisition. Every time we get a little bit closer to

holding powerful men accountable for their actions, bad historical metaphors tumble forth from people who are eager to appear to be concerned about overreach and due process. Overreach is always possible. Due process is important. But comparisons that equate holding the powerful accountable with the systematic persecution of marginalized people are both offensive and intended to obfuscate the truth.” He asserts that the inaccuracy of these metaphors lies in the fact that the consequences facing a man resigning from his job based on sexual misconduct allegations do not equate to the consequences facing those falsely accused in oppressive historic events, such as execution and ostracization. While concerns with overreach and due process are justified, the statistics demonstrating the reality of unreported assault cases compared to the number of false reports proves that the movement is more important than ever in challenging patriarchal ideals that have discouraged women from speaking out.

After analyzing the various positions of #MeToo controversy, the underlying question still remains: overall, is social media platform for the #MeToo movement an effective catalyst for physical change or will these floods of stories fail to prompt society to fix the problem? With the popularization of the #MeToo movement erupting on various social platforms, skeptics of the viral hashtag argue that simply tweeting about the systemic problem of sexual violence will not aide in revolutionizing gender and sex dynamics. One female activist, Wagatwe Wanjuki expressed her frustration when stating, “I know, deep down, it won’t do anything. Men who need a certain threshold of survivors coming forward to ‘get it’ will never get it,” asserting her position that men should already be fully aware of the problem and that the reliance on survivors “outing” themselves as a mechanism of change pressures and overwhelms women due to the sensitivity of the topic. She writes that #MeToo awareness campaign should be directed at men to take accountability for sexual misconduct and contemplate their overall treatment of women

rather than the burden falling on the exploitation of women's suffering (Wanjuki). Additionally, a published research study titled “#MeToo and the promise and pitfalls of challenging rape culture through digital feminist activism” illustrates that the internet can be a toxic space for digital feminism that creates more problems for the survivors, with “72% of survey respondents experiencing negativity, hostility or trolling in response to their feminist views and challenges to rape culture online,” (Mendes et al.). This resentment can be attributed to males digitally resisting the hashtag out of aggravation for the blame falling on all men as a group or those indicating that change is not necessary or desired (Pettyjohn et al.).

The substantial perspective held by activists ultimately believing the hashtag will prove to be ineffectual at the cost of women publicizing their abuse is counteracted by Tarana Burke, the creator of #MeToo, who urges that the movement was initially created as an outlet for survivors to finally be heard, not as a method of digitally condemning perpetrators. She advises those who feel overwhelmed or pressured by the expansion of the movement to “disconnect, don't feel guilty about it...do that work on your own pace. Six months from now if you want to say, 'me too,' it's there. It exists forever,” (“#MeToo made the scale”). In addition to serving as a space for survivors, the previously cited published study by Kaitlynn Mendes et al., that conducted interviews with more than 82 women around the world and examined over 800 pieces of online data, revealed that despite the online hostility shown to #MeToo participants, the digital medium for activism was still interpreted as a safer and more efficient way to interact in feminist conversations than in an offline forum. They found that this solidarity arising from #MeToo movement “transforms into a feminist consciousness among hashtag participants, which allows them to understand sexual violence as a structural rather than personal problem,” highlighting the efficiency of the movement as a platform for support and female activism. The movement has

not only contributed to sexual assault survivors' digital unity but has also increased awareness within all groups in society, ranging from men to younger generations, stepping into the discussion of feminism. Pettyjohn et al. discerned within their study after analyzing data collected from male Twitter users that the overall response was positive and actively discussed solutions to put an end to the current rape culture and had an increased awareness of their personal interactions with women after the #MeToo movement that they previously did not contemplate.

Overall, the employment of social media as a tool for the #MeToo movement has revolutionized female activism, allowing women to publicly be heard instead of traditionally being pushed to silence. Although the importance of the movement does involve an activism of widespread change to ultimately face the systemic issues stemming from the movement, the conversation alone is the catalyst for change to demonstrate to assaulters that victims will no longer suffer in silence, thanks to their newfound digital solidarity. The movement primarily as a support system encourages women to seek help rather than continue to conceal past abuses as a social norm. I believe that women are not "outing" themselves, but merely gaining the courage to inspire others and act as a bolstering of support whose care for the victims in seeking help precedes the consequences placed on men. The mere conversation generated by the #MeToo movement could also deter assailants from viewing rape as a low-risk, high-reward act to one that will no longer be taken with a grain of salt. Before approaching a concrete plan of action, society must first recognize the quintessential importance of disassembling the notion that women's bodies are sexual objects for men; this ultimately relies on a collaborative effort from all members of society to spread awareness of these issues.

While I recognize the legitimacy of male and female concerns, men who decide to distance themselves from women in the workplace because they are fearful of their behavior and how it might be interpreted should instead question why that behavior would be subjected to speculation in the first place; a clear-cut line of appropriate work nature exists and simply asking women can erase confusion or misinterpretation. Additionally, concerns with false allegations are concerning as they do occur and undermine the movement; however, the comparison between those that go unreported due to survivors' fear of being discredited or not believed is a more pressing issue. Ultimately, the concrete solution depends on society as a whole instilling in the next generation teachings that offset the previous conventions of masculinity and accepted male behavior. Males, specifically, need to personally contemplate their participation of society's view of masculinity and challenge the behaviors of other men regardless of public perception. Additionally, due process should be regarded after an allegation and should undergo an investigation to receive justice for the victim or the accused. One view I deem to be worthy of further consideration is the fact that the movement must extend to the groups of men and women who do not hold a public position or receive celebrity media attention; this wave of change must occur across all regions of America and all classes of people. Otherwise, the true purpose of the #MeToo movement, created over 12 years ago, would be lost.

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