

#MeAfterToo
The Hashtag That Toppled Hegemons?
A Feminist Narrative Case Study Of #MeToo

by

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Abstract

Unlike many less successful precursors, #MeToo exploded onto social media in a way in which previous viral feminist hashtags had not. Created by activist Tarana Burke and later picked up and amplified by multiple celebrity voices, such as Alyssa Milano and Rose McGowan, #MeToo would be shared tens of millions of times by 2018, becoming an amplified vehicle for women's voices and a means of denouncing violence and patriarchy across the globe. So widely amplified, in fact, that it began to topple real-world hegemons and a feminist battle-cry was born. Yet while some criticized hashtag activism as 'slacktivism', #MeToo managed to achieve what other hashtags did not, and few feminist scholars have been able to articulate the reasons why. This study looks at what propelled so many more individual women to suddenly opt-in to public discourse than ever before. In the film #MeAfterToo, I examine the ways that hashtag activism can evolve into visible, immutable, and compelling global protest, by highlighting several powerful individual narratives in order to uncover those 'reasons why'. Illuminating myriad intersecting themes such as a lack of institutionalized gatekeeping and a facility of participation without qualification, as well as a time and place where feminist anger had reached a watershed, (bolstered by the fact that literally anyone could post a single word online in order to join the conversation), simplicity emerged as key. To best display the data, the case study's film speaks to 6 individual women and 3 experts from Ontario, Canada, placing each of these narratives in conversation with one another in order to showcase personal faces and voices alongside real testimonial on questions of female agency, gendered power imbalances, workplace harassment and complaint structures, as well as prevailing attitudes toward rape-culture and normalized micro-aggression. From a feminist constructivist point of view, participants all agreed: a proverbial ice-berg has broken free such that the socio-political time for an emergence of far-reaching and long-term feminist disruption is, quite literally, now.

Keywords

#MeToo, #MeAfterToo, feminism, social media, sexual violence, rape culture, micro-aggression, sexual harassment, intersectionality, critical feminist theory, feminist constructivism.

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To the kind and courageous women who lent their voice, both interviewees and experts alike, in this documentary: by taking on additional risk of backlash in order to “go public” about subject matter which still holds significant stigma in our culture, you have demonstrated the power that the female voice is capable of wielding when we rise. You are my hope and my inspiration. I salute you and sincerely hope I’ve done your eloquent words as much justice as you wished for.

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To everyone else who chose (or might still choose) to be present for the film’s feminist journey, I know we can agree on at least one thing: Patriarchy is so passé. Let’s continue to RISE TOGETHER AND SMASH IT.

Introduction

#MeAfterToo—The Hashtag That Toppled Hegemons?

A Feminist Narrative Case Study Of #MeToo

On October 5, 2017, journalists Megan Twohey and Jodi Kantor at *The New York Times* released a ground-breaking expose accusing Hollywood media executive, Harvey Weinstein, of multiple acts of criminal sexual misconduct, assault, and rape (Twohey & Kantor, 2017).

Weinstein's media indictment, alongside immediate and public outrage from influential celebrity social media users like @alyssa_milano, @rosemcgowan and others on Twitter (Cobb & Horeck, 2018), sparked a storm of digital conversations between survivors of assault, feminist activists, and the media. Millions of lived female experiences with misogyny and everyday sexism were shared, united under the hashtag #MeToo; a social media moniker originally coined in 2006 by feminist activist, Tarana Burke (Ohlheiser, 2017).

As a means to call for and spread support and empathy toward women who had experienced systemic abuse, #MeToo had already achieved noteworthiness. But subsequent to Twohey and Kantor's media expose and celebrity amplification thereafter, the hashtag's popularity exploded. A re-ignited digital feminist battle-cry, #MeToo hit the public sphere and spread in a way that previous viral feminist hashtags had failed to (Jackson, 2018). Where prior social media events like 2014's #YesAllWomen and #BeenRapedNeverReported, as well as 2016's #WhyIStayed saw thousands of sympathetic responses online (Clark, 2016; Keller, Mendes & Ringrose, et. al., 2018; Thrift, 2014), most were transient instances. Hashtag feminist shoutback on social media had shown a pattern of rise-and-fall inefficacy, trapped within an ephemeral Internet sea of shifting attention spans, and on-again-off-again interest from both popular influencers and the media (Thrift, 2014; Clark, 2016). Yet, somehow, 2017 saw not one, but *two* groundbreaking investigative exposes on gender-based violence fill the lens of mainstream American journalism.

As both *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* published simultaneously damning accusations against longstanding entertainment industry hegemon, Harvey Weinstein (Farrow, 2017; Twohey & Kantor, 2017), a tidal wave of a novel sort arose. Internet feminist anti-violence activists took to unprecedented collective and individual battle stations (Cobb & Horeck, 2018), thousands of voices online grew to hundreds of thousands within a matter of days (Peters & Besley, 2018). Journalist Ronan Farrow's personal interviews with multiple women who alleged instances of Weinstein's criminal abuse, and the accompanied complicity of an unscrupulous Hollywood industry (Farrow, 2017), sparked outrage not only from the celebrity community, but from the public as well, manifesting with media-amplified cries for immediate legal action and justice (Jaffe, 2018; Peters & Besley, 2018). Bolstered by such powerful new visibility, feminists began to demand more mainstream recognition of gender bias, abuse, and sexual harassment, as immediate and epidemic social concerns (Cobb & Horeck, 2018). As such, the normative, transitory paradigm for digital feminist hashtag protest (as a reactive-only force) had irrevocably evolved.

In terms of memetic events (Thrift, 2014), where social media instantiated protest is amplified by mainstream media, #MeToo transcended its predecessors when it jumped from online spaces into offline resistance. By sidestepping longstanding gatekeepers, this landslide of social media sharing of female lived experiences with normalized abuse and violence, engendered a new niche within the feminist collectivist communications space (Keller, Mendes & Ringrose, et. al., 2018). Certainly, the numbers showed an increase in attention, with #MeToo instances in the millions by early 2018 (Cobb & Horeck, 2018). More importantly, and for the first time in digital feminist hashtag protest history, multiple powerful male hegemons began toppling like dominos from their proverbial towers. Within weeks, Harvey Weinstein was indicted, actor Bill Cosby charged with rape, comedian Louis CK and popular news host Matt Lauer, accused of abuse, while dozens of other men from celebrity positions in media, film, television, music, sports,

and fashion, were similarly exposed for abusive and rapacious behaviors (Cobb & Horeck, 2018; Phipps & Ringrose, et al., 2018; Rodino-Colocino, 2018). Public discourse on gender and power had also shifted with #MeToo, creating a landscape for what communications scholars, Cobb and Horeck, called “a mass disclosure event,” (2018, pp. 489), wherein social acceptance for normative gender-based violence and everyday sexism deteriorated in novel ways.

In their paper, *Speaking ‘unspeakable things’: documenting digital feminist responses to rape culture*, Keller, Mendes & Ringrose (2016) also discuss the ways in which social media has begun to enable “the possibility of generating unprecedented connections and unexpected events” (p. 24). Today’s modern digital protest culture has evolved to employ the power of hashtag activism in disruptive ways which had only begun to be anticipated within the previous handful of years. Feminist hashtag events, such as the aforementioned, #YesAllWomen, #BeenRapedNeverReported, and #WhyIStayed, are three of over a dozen examples within the previous half-decade (Horeck, 2014; Thrift, 2014; Keller, Mendes & Ringrose, et. al., 2016; Clark, 2016). Still, while such events (as discourse) are often captured in scholarship, the individual narratives detailing personal reasons *why* so many women have recently begun to take both online *and* offline actions via feminist battle-cries like #MeToo, remains largely unexplored. Consequently, the potential for creating overly simplistic binaries when referring to online vs. offline protest/activism, may be growing increasingly problematic.

I proposed the research question: What factors contributed to the #MeToo movement’s unprecedented evolution from previously reactive patterns of online social media protest to a powerful feminist force for real-world collective disruption? Furthermore, what were the individual reasons that so many female-identified voices suddenly chose to challenge pervasive personal and professional stigmas in order to share their very personal (often traumatic) stories online via #MeToo?

Narrative research into the reasons why individuals might choose to share personal lived-experience stories in the public sphere, specifically stories which surround issues such as trauma or abuse, is necessarily sensitive in nature. Requisite is both an assured safe space to share, and well-informed participant consent. Yet the result of collecting and analyzing these sensitive narratives may yield precious understanding of the ways in which individuals frame their personal experiences within the broader landscape of both individual and collective identities.

By employing a narrative case study, situated within the qualitative paradigm of critical feminist theory, I planned to interview, document, and thematically analyze individual female-identified stories among four-to-six participants of the #MeToo hashtag protest movement. The outcome of #MeToo can be seen as remarkable, both online and offline, as it remains ongoing: Hundreds of thousands of self-identified female voices who had previously been silent came forward via social media, while historically indomitable hegemons began losing their coveted public reputations, criminal immunities, and careers (Peters & Besley, 2018; Cobb & Horeck, 2018). Discovering the individual and collectivist reasons that many women became emboldened to share publicly, as well as how the #MeToo movement differed in the minds of its participants, from other feminist social media calls-to-action which had preceded it, would be key to understanding the shift that took place from reaction online to disruption in the real world. Thematic analysis via narrative case study would assist me in uncovering both unique and overlapping themes within each participant's narrative, as well as expose perceptions surrounding the socio-political landscape of the #MeToo participant community. This form of research is therefore best positioned to help me extend and amplify the voice of the female lived experience herein. By doing so, it was also my hope to discover nuanced answers to questions of feminist agency and community empowerment, as well as expand current discourse on hashtag feminist protest as a growing medium for successful organization.

Literature Review

In the modern-day battle against gender-based violence, feminist discursive tacticians have employed multiple modes of message encoding for varied anti-violence communication strategies. Themes of sexual assault emerge in the literature, some citing a dominantly female experience (Peters & Besley, 2018). The pros and cons of internet shoutback feminist protest tactics are argued (Horeck, 2014), using myriad examples such as #YesAllWomen, #WhyIStayed, #BeenRapedNeverReported, and others (Clark, 2016; Horeck, 2014, Thrift, 2014). It's also clear that a prevalence of rape culture remains pandemic and relevant in all feminist discourse, as a mainstream social threat (Keller, Mendes & Ringrose, et. al., 2016; Cobb & Horeck, 2018). Yet alongside arguments both for and against using social media as a medium for post-feminist collective empowerment (Jackson, 2018; Keller, Mendes & Ringrose, et. al., 2016; Thrift, 2014), there remains dissent about how to successfully harness the potential power of organizing hashtag protest beyond the screen. Concurrently, there is also little qualitative research into the individual narratives of female-identified persons who choose to share their stories as part of a movement toward an amplified feminist agenda to empowerment.

This review of relevant literature will examine current scholarship and discourse surrounding the #MeToo conversation; a movement which caught fire in a novel way among women on popular social media channels. In addition, this review will cite recent academic discourse on the paradigm of digital post-feminist hashtag protest culture as a progressively evolving trend, while navigating the relative absence of individual narratives within scholarship therein.

A Divided Feminist Protest Culture

Division among feminist scholars regarding tactics for successful activism is not new to media discourse. Some scholars have argued there may not yet be a successful way to mobilize a

hashtag effectively from an online space into an offline (real world) impact (Thrift, 2014). Others insist the key to longevity lies with amplification and that this responsibility lies with mainstream media (Jackson, 2018; Cobb & Horeck, 2018). Yet amidst the discourse on hashtag conversations, themselves, there is relatively little academic examination involving a deep dive into the individual lived experiences of the female identified persons who are currently making use of them.

While feminist scholars like Samantha Thrift (2014), Rosemary Clark (2016), and Tanya Horeck (2016; 2018) do much to advance the conversation on hashtag feminist protest as a growing trend (Cobb & Horeck, 2018, pp. 489), little narrative research is being done involving interviews with individual women who have chosen to contribute their personal stories of gender-based trauma on today's social media platforms—particularly in the public sphere. Consequently, there remains a dearth of thematic representations cited in literature through which hashtag movements might effectively predict new opportunities to build future disruption for change (Berridge & Portwood-Stacer, 2015; Thrift, 2014). Scholarship discussing feminist hashtag activism has also indicated frustration over the impermanence of social media protest, indicating a tendency toward ephemerality and an ineffectuality across time (Baer, 2016; Berridge & Portwood-Stacer, 2015; Horeck, 2014). In their paper on *Feminism, Hashtags and Violence against Women and Girls*, gender and diversity scholars, Susan Berridge and Laura Portwood-Stacer (2015) also argue that hashtag protest mediums may foster discursive limitations by oversimplifying complex issues such as rape culture and gender bias (pp. 341) in order to fit within truncated mediums. Yet if this is indeed the case, then how did #MeToo become such a visible exception?

A Pandemic of Normative Gender Bias and Rape Culture

For the purpose of this research, the term “gender bias” acknowledges the existence of pervasive hegemonic social perspectives in modern culture which continue to attribute female abilities, career competencies, strengths, and/or intrinsic characteristics, attributes and behaviors as

less valuable in potential than those of their male counterparts (Keller, Mendes & Ringrose, et. al., 2016). The term “rape culture” first appeared in a 1974 book, entitled, *Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women*, edited by Noreen Connell and Cassandra Wilson (Keller, Mendes & Ringrose, et. al., 2016). It would later be adopted in a 1975 documentary by Margaret Lazarus and Renner Wunderlich, titled *Rape Culture* (Peters & Besley, 2018). Their discussion noted the insidiousness of a patriarchal society which normalizes and excuses sexual violence against women and girls; making it difficult to prosecute or critically condemn such routine conduct (Peters & Besley, 2018, p. 3). Within the landscape of current culture, women continue to find themselves in clear and present danger, lacking both the tools and socio-political structures to exercise their agency where necessary, and to report to authority if/when they feel violated.

Further, due to an increase in the amplification of these dangers, current scholarly discourse on post-feminist activism reports both feminism and misogyny as increasingly visible within modern conversation, as well as mainstream media (Horeck, 2014; Peters & Besley, 2018). Much of this current popularization may be due to the prolific sharing of lived experiences between women and girls on public social media platforms such as Twitter (Thrift, 2014). Shared experiences involving gender biases and socially normative gender-based violence or everyday micro-aggression have recently begun to reach new levels growth (Cobb & Horeck, 2018, pp. 490). Feminist sociology scholar, Samantha Thrift (2014), also argues that the term “rape culture” has seen rebirth as a social disruptor and a hashtag signifier (p. 1091), exposing the ways in which society perceives and behaves toward victims of sexual violence (and those who perpetrate such violence). Many of today’s feminist scholars are attempting to build on grammar which sustains this (Horeck, 2014; Keller, Mendes & Ringrose, et. al., 2016; Clark, 2016, Peters & Besley, 2018; Phipps & Ringrose, et al., 2018; Rodino-Colocino, 2018), thereby forging new road-maps for assisting in the creation of what media professor Jessalyn Keller calls “online cultures of support

for victims of sexual assault and violence, which can interrupt rape culture through a variety of creative [digital] interventions” (Keller, Mendes & Ringrose, et. al., 2016, p. 24). And support is critical, as this study will highlight. Where women feel supported and able to access the agency required to pass their stories on without gatekeeping, powerful feminist forces for change may begin to emerge and resonate across boundaries.

Yet, while a plethora of scholarship has documented the fact that hashtag feminist protests have been growing in quantity since 2014 (Horeck, 2014; Thrift, 2014, Clark, 2016, Clark, 2018, Cobb & Horeck, 2018; Jaffe, 2018; Peters & Besley, 2018; Phipps & Ringrose, et al., 2018; Rodino-Colocino, 2018, Turley & Fisher, 2018), few scholars cite the nuanced impact of sharing individual lived experiences while speaking of the women who choose to participate. Likewise, few cite instances of every-day patriarchal micro-aggression as important signifiers. If a possibility does exist for feminist activists to (re)create the conditions optimal for mass disclosure events wherein large numbers of women would likely choose to contribute their individual personal stories on social media, and if we lower the bar for public outrage from a necessity of reporting rape to an agreement on that our definition of “assault” may also include acts of everyday micro-aggression and normalized patriarchal sexism, might that assist in the development of a sustainable roadmap for fostering further real-world feminist disruption? At the very least, it may finally become a predictable (and demonstrably powerful) outcome of a future where planned hashtag protest movements could rival or even exceed the magnitude of #MeToo.

In their article, *Quantifying the Power and Consequences of Social Media Protest*, scholars Freelon, McIlwain & Clark (2018) put forth that the power of any protest movement as it is exerted through social media can, indeed, be quantified, since “abstract concepts of power developed for offline social movements manifest and change over time in social media” (p. 993). Before we can reliably predict those changes, however, it’s likely we will also need to explore what motivates

individual people to participate in communities of mass disclosure. Not all feminist scholars have historically agreed upon whether prolific social media conversations about gender-based violence actually leads to consistently positive outcomes, nor whether safe digital spaces can ever be maintained for those who choose to share their experiences in today's volatile internet landscape (Clark, 2018; Jackson, 2018). Platforms like Twitter have inarguably amplified the female voice as it pertains to cultural depictions of rape, misogyny, and patriarchy (Thrift, 2014, Cobb & Horeck, 2018; Keller, Mendes & Ringrose, et. al., 2016, Peters & Besley, 2018), yet these same mediums have provided equal opportunity for the amplification of so-called trolls and abusers to discover ready access to new potential victims (Jackson, 2016, Jackson 2018, Clark, 2018; Cobb & Horeck, 2018; Turley & Fisher, 2018). As Horeck (2014) points out, "it is vital not to forget that social networks also promulgate sexually violent discourse and expand opportunities to shame and humiliate women" (p. 1106). Feminist media scholarship may still have "yet to model the conditions under which activists can successfully and safely mobilize online" (Clark, 2016, pp. 788), but as of 2018, while safety may remain a wildcard, there does appear to be mounting evidence which demonstrates the potential political efficacy of hashtag activism in mobilizing new online-to-offline modes of anti-violence critique and post-feminist collectivity (Cobb & Horeck, 2018). If that is indeed the case, then research into both individual and collectivist motivation for participation must concurrently evolve, in order to predict the mechanisms through which a successful disruption of status quo is most likely to occur.

Shouting Back: Post-Feminist Collectivist Empowerment via Digital Hashtag Protest

In her 2016 essay, *Hope in a hashtag*, Rosemary Clark discusses how Twitter hashtag #WhyIStayed evolved from the online release of explicit video footage showing an NFL player brutally beating his girlfriend, into a viral protest platform instantiated by women who gathered on social media to express their outrage and solidarity (Clark, 2016). According to Clark (2016), over

100,000 female-identified participants took part within the first week, sharing personal experiences of domestic violence, and calling upon politicians for greater support mechanisms:

Imagine one hundred thousand domestic violence survivors demanding change, each shouting one reason why she stayed with her abuser, in a direct affront to the overly simplistic victim-blaming logic that dominates news coverage of violence against women (Clark, 2016, p. 793).

Yet Clark's simultaneous criticism of a lack of longevity for the protest, alongside a dearth of existing scholarly literature on the themes which could illustrate a potential for hashtag protest as a possible discursive disruptor (Clark, 2016, p. 794) illuminates a consistent trend. An accessible sense of affirmation and 'unity,' says Freelon, Mcilwain & Clark (2018), is often more powerful than insecurity over worthiness (p. 994). Many current studies underestimate the political potential of digital hashtag-activist communities and concentrate solely on the size and amplitude of isolated mobilizations (Clark, 2016). Yet, in Clark's view, the discourse itself *is* a mode of activism, capable of eliciting change through what she calls, "connective action," wherein social media posts can build further power through collectively constructed, thematically linked narratives which have the potential to transcend their internet spaces (Clark, 2016, p. 791). In their analysis of social media landscapes surrounding the "Black Lives Matter" protest, Freelon, Mcilwain & Clark (2018) also illuminated that digital counter-public movements can indeed "attract elite attention via social media as their concerns are broadcast through news outlets" (p. 1005). Such was the landscape into which #MeToo emerged: new grammar was introduced to collective meaning-making surrounding sexual assault, misogyny, and rape (Peters & Besley, 2018, p. 3), and discursive debate surrounding the validity of digital media to produce "real" change within protest politics shifted. Inarguably, corporations and government have since been forced to acknowledge their own complicity.

Beginning with Harvey Weinstein's unprecedented firing for sexual misconduct, and his dismissal from several other organizations in which he held positions of authority (including the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences), Peters and Besley noted that soon thereafter, "more than 42 other men were similarly accused of sexual assault and forced to resign from their positions in Hollywood, media and politics" (Peters & Besley, 2018, p. 3). Since 2018, the New York times would increase this number to well over 200. This landslide of feminist disruption came to be known as "The Weinstein Effect" (Cobb & Horeck, 2018). In her seminal book, *Living a Feminist Life*, noted feminist scholar and activist, Sarah Ahmed (2017), also writes of the ways in which feminist theory can be shaped through an examination of the "ordinary experiences of women at home and at work ... since Feminism, as a collective movement, is made out of how we are moved to become feminists in dialogue with others. And a movement requires us to be moved" (p. 5). Our individual and female lived experiences, says Ahmed, are "not just of being worn down; these experiences also give us resources. What we learn from these experiences might be how we survive these experiences" (p. 235). The powerful collective momentum of the #MeToo movement had inarguably emboldened more women to step forward than ever before. Where previously each individual may have remained intimidated to speak out amidst potential stigmatization, in this instance, the use of collective hashtag activism had clearly empowered a greater force for both community and individual protest action.

Sexual Assault: A Dominantly Female Experience

In the midst of #MeToo, a social watershed occurred: Widespread, celebrity and media-bolstered recognition for the fact that sexual predation was not just concentrated in politics, movies and mass media but occurred everywhere in our patriarchal culture (Peters & Besley, 2018). Furthermore, as the majority of victim statements rolled in, a trend long known to feminist activists had finally gone viral among the social media masses. Most victims described personal experiences

of sexual assault perpetrated on women, by heterosexual men (Peters & Besley, 2018 p. 1). By establishing this theme, Peters and Besley proposed that narratives exposing previously unspoken hegemonic gender imbalances had finally been amplified through collective action online, to such an extent that they were no longer ignorable *offline*. Individual stories created a mosaic of millions of women who spoke of battling a culture where men of influence routinely used their unearned privilege to perpetrate acts of everyday sexism, or to coerce women into sexual situations (Peters & Besley, 2018). And media discourse had also begun a shift, moving beyond deliberately provocative exposes on salacious victim details into narratives of normative abuse. With such a mainstream shift in eye-line, came a concurrent shift in social attitudes (Cobb & Horeck, 2018). Controversies surrounding so-called “ethical” cross-examinations of the backstories of female victims were, for the first time, beginning to take a discursive backseat to stories focused upon the individual perpetrators of violence, instead.

A Powerful Female Perspective

As feminist scholars Horeck and Jackson, respectively, point out within their activist work, online protest movements can often be decentralized and “leader-full” (Horeck, 2014; Jackson, 2018). With multiple heads and conflicting (argumentative) agendas, a lack of strong direction or organized permanence has given social media activism a reputation for being feckless (Clark, 2014; Jackson 2016; Kangere, Kemitare, & Michau, 2017). Public interest rises and falls quickly in online spaces, and trends may be swayed by hegemon-controlled mass media (Clark, 2016; Horeck, 2014; Rentschler, 2017; Tufekci, 2017). Yet the sharing of millions of personal stories in such a short period of time via #MeToo could not be easily ignored, nor silenced; reaching social media platforms and news organizations worldwide within a matter of hours (Cobb & Horeck, 2018; Peters & Besley, 2018). Celebrity and media participation assured a substantial increase in visibility for the protest as women began to forge new connections and establish better boundaries

for their own safety (Keller, Mendes & Ringrose, 2016; Clark, 2016; Peters & Besley, 2018). There hadn't been a feminist movement with this level of amplification in decades.

While literature analyzing previous feminist hashtag calls to action revealed that sharing and mobilization *can* effectively occur in digital spaces when individuals set aside personal agendas in favour of the needs of a collectivist agenda (Thrift, 2014; Cobb & Horeck, 2018; Peters & Besley, 2018; Jackson, 2018; Clark, 2018), scholarship has yet to emerge which attempts to delve into the critical feminist reasons why individual women may have suddenly felt more emboldened through #MeToo specifically. Turkish sociology scholar Zeynep Tufekci (2017) posits that a comprehensive study of modern protest requires the researcher to include analysis of agency, technology and culture simultaneously (p. 129). Still, most feminist social media sharing-related data relies heavily on a quantitative overview, forming critical arguments based upon how many people participate in specific hashtag activist events (Peters & Besley, 2018; Cobb & Horeck, 2018; Keller, Mendes & Ringrose, et. al., 2018), and this data matters, yet it presents an incomplete picture without paying particular respect to individual agency. Based on her research with social media algorithms and influencer amplification techniques, Tufekci believes that social media protest efficacy may indeed be predictable, and that modern digital technology use has inexorably changed the nature of collective action (Tufekci, 2017). For this reason, the implications for advancing critical feminist scholarship via narrative case study work on movements like #MeToo are myriad. The sheer pandemic diversity of woman-identified persons now willing to adopt anti-violence hashtags like #MeToo into their own conversations, provides powerful mobilization potential and a vital conduit for modern post-feminist internet anti-violence activists.

Methodology

A qualitative narrative case study grounded within the critical paradigm of feminist constructivism was conducted in order to answer my 15 primary research questions. This study

employed hour-long, in-depth interviews with 6 women who had chosen to participate in the #MeToo movement online. Focusing on their individual narratives as data, using film as a medium for disclosure, multiple interconnected and overlapping themes emerged related to socially extant power structures systemically embedded in current culture. Data was analyzed using thematic content analysis in order to ascertain relevant codes and themes throughout the editing process for the film.

As a longtime feminist activist, rape survivor, participant of #MeToo and film producer/documentarian, it was my belief that I might be well positioned to present such opt-in participatory data from the feminist online anti-violence activist community. It was concurrently my hope to better understand and extend the power of digital feminist protest action through the gathering and qualitative analysis of these stories, in order to identify the factors, mechanisms and processes involved in collectivist disruption of rape culture and patriarchal hegemony. Once key factors, mechanisms, and processes behind successful collectivist disruption are identified, it seems likely that future disruptive efforts may be both anticipated and successfully organized.

A Critical Feminist Theoretic Framework

Feminism may be defined as “a range of social movements, political movements, and ideologies that share a common goal: to define, establish, and achieve the political, economic, personal, and social equality of all gender identities and sexes” such that we can better understand and improve the lives of women (Woodiwiss, Smith & Lockwood, 2017, pp. 14). Central to all feminist theories are the concepts of gender and sex as distinct entities. Gender is a social construct which may evolve through history and/or specific cultural contexts. Sex, in contrast, is a biological assignment. Gender biases may therefore influence expectations, social opportunities, and roles (Wood, 2008, pp. 325). Critical feminist theory, she further explicates, can be employed to identify prevailing structures and practices vis-à-vis gender or sex, which may “create or uphold

disadvantage, inequity, or oppression, and point the way toward alternatives that promote more egalitarian possibilities for individuals, relationships, groups, and societies” (Wood, 2008, pp. 325). Critical feminist theory in research seeks to discover how female identified persons may become empowered and, “in some cases, how they change dominant patterns and perhaps the ideologies that underlie them” (Wood, 2008, pp. 326). Feminist stances make issues of gender relationships and patriarchal power structures central to the design of their qualitative interviews (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004; Berridge & Portwood-Stacer, 2015; Woodiwiss, Smith & Lockwood, 2017). It was my intention to do the same. Since the aim of my research was to uncover themes which may lead to new potential for the collective disruption of patriarchal hegemony, critical feminist theory presented as an ideal framework in which to situate my research. Furthermore, a critical lens within my narrative analysis was foundational to presenting how new meanings and/or opportunities for individual and collective empowerment may have been engendered during the #MeToo event; an essential element to my study.

In their book, “*Feminist Narrative Research*”, Woodiwiss, Smith & Lockwood (2017) suggest that “in doing feminist narrative research, researchers need to look, not only at the stories being told, but also at the contexts within which women make sense of and narrate their lives” (pp. 5). To that end, I chose a qualitative narrative case study, situated within the critical paradigm of feminist constructivism as a framework of inquiry for my research. This approach seeks to ascertain the ways in which knowledge may be gathered, created and shared collaboratively (Woodiwiss, Smith & Lockwood, 2017). Professor Natasha Mauthner (2017) also posits that the reasons how and why specific personal narratives may be shared during specific time periods has much to do with “the ways in which we listen” (pp. 85). It is my belief that there may therefore be potential for predicting new and different trends toward emergent story-sharing and resultant potential for political disruption within socio-political contexts.

Phenomenology espouses a systematic examination of personal lived experiences (McLeod, 2001, pp. 37). Qualitative phenomenological research examines human conceptions of reality “in individual, detailed ways, in order to discover the meanings which people place on their lived experiences” (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004, p. 57). Thus in order to focus upon the ways in which meaning had been discursively constructed and agreed upon between collectivist actors (participants) in this study, it was important to collect and analyze their individual stories in-depth (Moua & Riggs, 2012; Clark, 2016; Woodiwiss, Smith & Lockwood, 2017), as well as to dig into the socio-political contexts surrounding and influencing each lived experience. A research model which paid respect to feminist constructivism within the scope of narrative content analysis therefore became ideal.

Situated within an over-arching critical feminist framework, feminist constructivism played a key role in my study analysis, providing insight into issues of institutional, systemic, and political gender inequities (Woodiwiss, Smith & Lockwood, 2017). Feminist constructivists believe that reality is engendered subjectively *through* our lived experiences, most notably where these experiences intersect with sociopolitical factors. Since hegemonic structures can be argued to exist concurrently within the landscape of each person’s lived experience, a feminist constructivist lens was apt for discovering where individual lived experiences with institutional hegemony may have influenced participant meaning-making in this study, and where such shared social creations could later be challenged as normative truths (Charmaz, 2003). While more generalized feminist methodologies can be somewhat less clear-cut in terms of paradigmatic stages, as there is “little consensus in literature on whether there is any particular specifically feminist approach to doing social research” (Allen, 2011, pp. 24), I do believe that by employing a feminist constructivist lens within the scope of my narrative analysis, there was useful latitude for drilling down into contextual influencers to the narratives collected—such as patriarchal social power imbalances and

the impact of experiences with persistent micro-aggression on the psyche of every participant in the study—overarching and institutionally perpetuated norms.

Worth noting as I began this study was the fact that I did share in conversation throughout the open-ended interview process, thus co-constructing some social relationships as well as some of the meanings established among my participants. As a rape survivor, myself, and a participant during #MeToo, I could be classified by what interpretivist scholar Harry Wolcott (1967) identified to be “participant as observer,” and my research did therefore involve a transactional epistemology (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004, p.163). Social (and feminist) constructivism assumes that knowledge is created by an interaction between the knower and the known “where subject and object emerge as partners—inseparable—in the generation of meaning,” (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004, p.174), thus my own previous knowledge of and interaction with rape and trauma survivors was not detrimental to the outcome of my research, rather it was instrumental in uncovering layers of nuance which were helpful in critical interpretive analysis.

Narrative Interviews: A Face and Voice for Experiences with Systemic Rape Culture

Throughout recorded history, women have often remained silent victims of normalized social and institutional rape culture, gender bias, micro-aggression and sexual abuse (Woodiwiss, Smith & Lockwood, 2017; Peters & Besley, 2018). Indeed, the stigma and backlash surrounding implications of admitting to these experiences has been so frightening for many women, that choosing to come forward into the public eye, even now, should be deemed an act of extreme courage (Cobb & Horeck, 2018). It is for this reason that a qualitative case study which lends both narrative voice and a physical face to the individual experiences of women who have felt empowered to rise and demand change in sharing the hashtag #MeToo may transcend a simple research analysis and also become a strong feminist communications tool for the further disruption of patriarchal hegemony. To that end, I have produced and directed a documentary film entitled,

“#MeAfterToo,” as a medium and a tool for presenting the data both collected and analyzed within the scope of my thesis. Employing discursive theoretical analysis as a tool while editing and constructing the film’s narrative arc (Berridge & Portwood-Stacer, 2015; Woodiwiss, Smith & Lockwood, 2017), this project was assembled using each of the individual stories obtained from the voices and faces of six (6) women who choose to participate in the study, alongside concurrent narratives from three (3) female-identified experts—An Ontario MPP, PhD, and advocate for women’s rights, one human rights and labour lawyer, as well as a popular feminist blogger, author and journalist.

I chose a narrative case study particularly because the aim of narrative research fell directly in line with my intention for this thesis work: “to tell, and to study, the stories of our experiences” (Clandinin, 2006, pp. 45). In his book, *Narrative Inquiry: A Methodology for Studying Lived Experience*, Clandinin (2006) asserts that “people are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals. They are always in relation, always in a social context.” (pp. 46). Thus, content analysis via narrative case study provided me with a means to better understand multi-dimensional experiences. It is also, in Clandinin’s words, “a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieu” (pp. 47). This is significant in that, as a researcher, we are able to enter a case in the midst or at the end of its progress, and even conclude our research inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of those experiences which occur amongst our participants lives, in both individual and social contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). Because of the richness of lived-experience data inherent in narrative case study research, it has become among the most popular modes of critical feminist inquiry within scholarship today.

Though the overarching aim of this thesis is to present findings obtained through narrative content analysis, gathering contextual data related to both the social and political landscape

surrounding this case and its participants could not be overlooked. In order to situate this research within a feminist constructivist framework (Allen, 2011; Charmaz & Belgrave, et., al, 2014), I had also gathered texts which were publicly posted on Twitter using the #MeToo hashtag and organized them by theme and experience in order to ground my editing process for the film. By applying a similar thematic content analysis to each narrative I collected thereafter (Lazar, 2007; Baer, 2016; Putri, Sukma & Ragil, et., al, 2017), I was able to cross-contextualize elements of each participant's lived experience with other external and relevant influencing factors, including their views on institutionalized norms, the socio-political framework(s) for those norms, as well as other elements such as access and agency.

Collection and Analysis of Narrative Lived Experience Data

In her book, "Foundations for Research: Methods of Inquiry in Education and Social Sciences," Kathleen deMarrais (2004) defines the essential core of a narrative interview as: "not simply exchanges of questions and answers by researchers and participants, but a form of discourse where the researcher and participant engage in co-constructing meaning within a particular type of social relationship" (DeMarrais & Lapan, 2004, p. 55). Since qualitative interviews are among the most comprehensive of methods used by other critical scholars in obtaining useful data for interpretation in order "to gain in-depth knowledge from participants about particular phenomena, experiences, or sets of experience" (DeMarrais & Lapan, 2004, p. 52), this study necessarily employed in-depth interviews to create as holistic a picture as possible from the words and experiences of each woman involved.

It was my intention that primary data for the study's narrative arc (contained within the documentary film) be collected using on-camera interviews with a minimum of 4 and a maximum of 6 opt-in adult female participants of the #MeToo hashtag movement (those who had chosen to share their personal stories and experiences via public social media platforms like Twitter. For the

purpose of this study, “opt-in female participants” may be defined as “female-identified adult persons who sign an agreement to participate in the narrative interview process,” and “an adult” will be defined as per the Canadian legal age of majority across all provinces, or “an individual who has reached a minimum of 19 years of age” (Government of Canada Department of Justice, n.d.). The acronym BIPOC refers to “Black, Indigenous and People of Color” as outlined in *The BIPOC Project: A Black, Indigenous and People of Color Movement* (BIPOC Project, n.d.). Interviews were arranged directly with participants via invitation online (private email, private social media messaging) and/or text message, phone call, or in person request. As an active member of the online anti-violence-against-women community on social media, it was my intention to employ a network-based selection strategy for participation (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004, p. 60). Initially, I reached out to my own social media and women’s empowerment networks online, spaces where women were already sharing their stories via truth-to-power communities. However, I did also offer the opportunity for volunteers to come forward privately and provided a dedicated email box where I could be contacted toward that end. Interviews were to take place primarily in Ontario and obtaining intersectional participation with women representing BIPOC and/or those affected by other marginalization(s) within our hegemonic culture, were initially prioritized during recruitment. While the process unfolded, I received approximately a dozen applicants to participate, and was able to hold preliminary conversations with most of these. Important to mention is the fact that women in disenfranchised and marginalized groups (BIPOC) demonstrated greater concern with displaying their stories publicly throughout my recruitment process. While four women from marginalized groups signed up initially, three did also later drop-out of the film process within 30 days of being interviewed due to concerns over potential eventual personal or professional backlash. Two of these dropouts were women of colour with MBA degrees. This would seem to further the established narrative that social privilege in systemic rape-

culture continues plays a significant role in who may even be able to find a way to ultimately report.

Interviews with the six (6) women who did remain in the study were captured in-person, both at a private and safe studio space, as well as on location (where requested) at the participant's home or office. Given that the nature of these discussions was predictably triggering for some participants, I had felt it important to conduct all interviews at the sole discretion of the participant, in a location they deemed safe and without crossing any subject-matter boundaries which the participant was uncomfortable addressing. In her writings, Kathleen deMarris (2004) points out that by allowing themselves to be studied, research subjects have a right to the social power that comes from that knowledge (pp. 17). Thus, in order to establish additional informed consent prior to the start of any interview, each participant was also allowed to re-read all electronic invitational and study design materials, as well as to ask any questions they may still have had (deMarris & Lapan, 2004). Individual interviews were casual in nature and generally ran approximately 60-85 minutes in length, including semi-structured and open-ended questions in order to obtain as comprehensive a personal narrative from each participant as possible (Thomas & Hall, 2008; Allen, 2011; Moua & Riggs, 2012; Clark, 2016; Woodiwiss, Smith & Lockwood, 2017). Semi structured interviews with conversational and open-ended questions were valuable to the process of engaging with subjects in a free manner, allowing them to contribute their ideas and communicate their challenges without restriction, thus providing a means to collaborate in the discovery and discussion of meaning(s).

In keeping with the practice of qualitative phenomenological interviewing (deMarris & Lapan, 2004, p. 55), participants were asked to identify what certain terms (such as "patriarchy" and "rape culture") meant to them, and whether those definitions have changed from when they first assimilated the words (Carter Olsen, 2016). Perceived meanings for these terms—previously

defined in literature review—arguably held significant weight among those who participated in #MeToo. Unpacking feminist theoretical themes during the interview process also assisted in starting a dialogue which lead to the sharing of richer narratives. In addition, interviewees were encouraged to talk about the types of voluntary social interactions they have had using the hashtag #MeToo (or others in previous feminist calls to action). Key to this process was asking each person to tell the story of any one (or more) particular catalysts which contributed to their choice to share previously sensitive or otherwise potentially traumatic lived-experiences in a public manner (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004, pp. 56). What sparked the decision? How did they feel beforehand, and then in the aftermath? From a narrative perspective, an inquiry which allowed participants the freedom to express their emotional underpinnings, engendered greater insight on my part during later analysis surrounding each individual's motivation.

Similar to a 2016 study by Carter Olsen involving the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls, effort was concurrently made to probe into the ways in which participation in #MeToo may have moved from online into offline spaces, and/or fostered an individual or collectivist sense of empowerment (Carter Olsen, 2016). Participants were asked to discuss revelations in terms of their own agency which may have arisen from their participation within the #MeToo movement. These insights were contrasted with the ways in which they felt their point of view may have differed, prior to participation, or how it evolved.

For the purpose of illuminating extant power imbalances which triggered the #MeToo movement, unpacking the feminist theoretical themes and codes which speak to each woman's individual challenges within a patriarchal status quo is requisite. As sociologist Jo Woodiwiss (2017) explains, "feminist narrative research must include an interest in the stories women (are able to) tell about their traumatic experiences. What is sometimes unclear or obscured in the process of collecting data, are the consequences to our storytelling. We can be imprisoned as well as liberated

by the stories we come to tell” (pp. 14). Given the nature of pervasive hegemonic structures still firmly in place, care was undertaken with each participant to allow for expression without censorship, and without judgement. Additionally, inquiring into whether participants believe progress has (or has not) been achieved via the #MeToo movement was manifest to predicting whether longer-term increases in personal agency could be bolstered through these types of hashtag protest events. If participants believed their actions had been helpful to dismantling social norms of pervasive institutional and/or social gender bias, potential did seem to exist through further empowerment and sharing to carry those feminist narratives forward into future action(s). At the conclusion of each interview process, those who wished to add to the conversation beyond the scope of the semi-structured inquiry were also given an opportunity to speak freely and voice their thoughts.

Qualitative data via each narrative obtained during the interview process was coded during the editing process for the film and themed through a critical feminist lens, within the well-established tradition of narrative content analysis (Souto-Manning, 2014; Woodiwiss, Smith & Lockwood, 2017). Emergent stages were apprehended using Ryan & Bernard (2003)’s qualitative theming framework: “(1) discovering themes and subthemes; (2) winnowing themes to a manageable few; (3) building hierarchies of themes or codes; (4) linking themes into (feminist) theory” (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 85). My analysis was multilayered and interpretive. Each story comprised a basic unit to be transcribed and reviewed in multiple stages (deMarris & Lapan, 2004). My lens examined the explicit manifestations of each narrative (the actual stories as these were told), as well as underlying individual and social (co)constructions of meaning (those biases and rationales which give each story shape).

Since storytelling is an abstract and collaborative process, so, too, was theming during this study. An inductive interpretation of each participant’s contribution to their own feminist narrative

played a key role. It was therefore important to discover which characteristic—“(phenomenon)-ness”—best captured meaningful results within each major theme as these emerged (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Major themes did emerge directly from patterns and recurrences observed within my participant answers. Primary data “types” and their resultant meanings became apparent in the documentary, as did discursive representations of social constructions which intersected with one another.

After transcribing each interview, an inductive thematic and open coding process (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004, p. 57) allowed me to pull out subcategories, as well as repeating representations of power and gender—integral to feminist paradigm (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004; Thomas & Hall, 2008; Allen, 2011; Moua & Riggs, 2012; Clark, 2016; Woodiwiss, 2017). Interviews were viewed as individual communication actions unto themselves, where participants were encouraged to articulate their meanings and share their own representations to describe each lived experience. My objective was to discover whether and how themes in evidence existed to establish the ways in which #MeToo evolved from reactive online protest into disruptive real-world action to dismantle patriarchal power structures. Further analysis involved searching for patterned data (codes) which was key to interpreting additional meanings and nuanced contexts. These included noteworthy commonalities between participants citing feelings of stigmatization, reticence to report ‘unworthy’ non-rape scenarios, and worry over outcome from ‘going public’ within a culture of patriarchal systemic imbalance.

Assembling A Critical Feminist Narrative Documentary

Capturing participant interviews on camera and interweaving these with expert testimony was integral to the method by which I wished to report upon the findings within the study process. As a documentarian, I know that video has the unique capacity to lend both voice and face (and potentially volume) to a subject-matter which is rarely discussed in such visible, personified,

spaces. Subjects such as rape culture and gender violence have historically been shrouded in stigma and taboo (Peters & Besley, 2018), yet millions of women emerged onto public social media channels during the #MeToo movement.

By showcasing the faces of women who've empowered themselves to come forward (both individually and via collectivist channels) in order to challenge hegemonic patriarchy using #MeToo, and bolstering their narratives alongside those of experts—all of whom had also experienced systemic rape-culture within their own female experiences— an opportunity was manifest to inspire and generate potential and visibility such that other women might also choose to come forward in future—and with wider-reaching audience potential than an academic paper alone. It was also my hope to better understand and extend the power of digital feminist protest action such that processes of collectivist disruption are identified, and future disruptive efforts may be both anticipated and successfully organized. Only by collecting and connecting the individual stories and lived experiences of women who chose to share within the larger narrative of the #MeToo movement, can a truly vital intersection between social media and collective identity assist us in discovering the reasons why so many women chose to share, in addition to the ways in which the movement evolved.

This thesis documentary did ultimately encompass an individual-into-collective storytelling process, weaving together the narratives of multiple singular voices, alongside elements of my academic findings, into a collaborative story with interconnections through multiple layers of interpretive analysis. Overlapping themes emerged through academic narrative research and by drilling down into each interview obtained, however it remains my belief that further themes may potentially be uncovered and continue to emerge into a broader discourse which may extend predictions for the future of online feminist activism. Within the scope of the documentary, portions of each interview were necessarily edited or abbreviated to adhere to time constraints,

however narrative and context were not altered, such that shared stories and meanings have been authentically preserved in the manner the participant intended. It was my objective to craft a film which could transcend academic discourse alone and encourage a critical discussion and conversation within public spheres as well.

Timeline and Budgetary Considerations

On camera interviews and research gathering for my thesis occurred between the months of January and March 2019. During this time, principle photography for the documentary component (including both A & B roll) was shot, and footage was transcribed for analysis and editing. From late March 2019 until early May 2019, my focus turned to editing, post-production, theming, and writing. Since I was using my own equipment alongside volunteer crew resources to produce the documentary component, there were no external budgetary sources required in order to complete my work.

Dismantling Systemic Patriarchal Power Structures

We know that major real-world social disruption occurred against patriarchal paradigms both online and offline in the aftermath of the #MeToo hashtag activist event. From mainstream media indictments, to criminal prosecutions of decades-old gender-based violence, to what has become known as “the Weinstein effect,” (Cobb & Horeck, 2018)—normalized gender imbalances and paradigms where rape culture seems integral to everyday life, were challenged in unprecedented ways across both institutional and social boundaries (Peters & Besley, 2018). Yet the question of why so many women had suddenly felt empowered as individuals, to demand the observance of new meanings for old tropes—such that each was compelled to rise above potential stigma in order to share their personal traumas publicly—remains largely unanswered in scholarship (Horeck, 2014). So, too, the question of how the #MeToo hashtag acquired enough momentum to finally penetrate the ephemerality of previous feminist social media calls to action.

A qualitative narrative case study, situated within a critical feminist paradigm, and assisted by thematic content analysis, was therefore requisite for the collection of my research data. It was also a potent “methodological soup” during the analysis of and visual assembly of the narrative arc for both my academic study, and what I feel is an important visual documentary component through which to disseminate my findings. An academic and filmic view toward sharing new feminist discursive paradigms which may help in the ongoing work of dismantling patriarchal status quos.

#MeAfterToo: The Documentary Film (Presentation and Analysis of Data)

Please refer to film/media accompanying this thesis.

Film Director's Cut: <https://vimeo.com/333000500> (**password:** please make requests directly to author, pending film distribution)

Conclusion

Summary Discussion

Digital hashtag activism has been virally mobilizing new voices in post-feminist critique and collectivism since the inception of social media (Cobb & Horeck, 2018). As a form of protest, hashtag feminism is inarguably reconfiguring the ways in which we experience and respond to constructs of sexual violence, misogyny and patriarchy (Clegg, 2006; Gerbaudo, 2012; Baer, 2016; Berridge & Portwood-Stacer, 2015; Drüeke & Zobl, 2016). Headway has been made in feminist spaces, and certainly achieved via recent viral anti-patriarchy hashtags like #MeToo. But there is still a great deal more work and education required—among all gender groups and in all intersections—before an iterative progress map may realistically be forged.

In sociological terms, our truths, when collected via individual narratives, contain myriad valuable insights into the larger institutional paradigms which surround us collectively (Gerbaudo, 2012). The personal stories of women who have experienced institutionalized rape culture must therefore also reflect elements of socio-political influences which work to shape their agency, and which are arguably concurrently affected by prevailing hegemonic institutions, like patriarchy, which surround us all. Thus, uncovering individual incentives for participating in collectivism like #MeToo revealed a motivational maelstrom as heavily influenced by external forces within each individual woman's life, as those which were internal.

The women in this study were unanimous in their opinion that by creating virtual access to “safe spaces” online where individuals are supported while their voices are amplified, those who participated in #MeToo (alongside those who came after and continue to share in the aftermath), felt increasingly able to overcome institutional stigma and potential backlash in order to demand collective change. The incentive for each individual woman to ‘go public’ in greater numbers appears directly correlated with a sense of safety which those greater numbers represents. And it's

working. In today's social media landscape, recurring anti-patriarchal themes have begun to achieve worldwide recognition (Cobb & Horeck, 2018; Grant, 2018). Unsurprisingly, many intersecting feminist themes became immediately evident during my interview process as well.

Gender Power Imbalance. A critical feminist constructivist lens during uncovered several shared systemic personal and/or socio-professional instances of gendered power inequity. Examples of harassment, assault, misogyny, lack of access to fair reporting structures, and personal fear were universal factors discussed by each woman and expert interviewed. Mention of (male > female) hegemonic structures appeared even within discussions of otherwise 'consensual' sexual relationships discussed. The notion that women must still take responsibility for shouldering, shrugging off, or even accepting and excusing daily acts of aggression or micro-aggression was also a universal experience for participants in this study.

Stigmatization of Reporting. In cases where participants noted that they could theoretically have 'chosen' to report on experiences with assault, harassment, or micro-aggression, both this study's participant group and expert group agreed that normalized systemic rape culture made such reporting extremely difficult and steeped in feelings of shame and/or personal failure; significantly more-so for additionally marginalized persons. In general, Women's feelings of violation took second seat to the excuses or demands of their male colleagues during confrontation, and encounters often ended with a male either berating, scolding, patronizing, or otherwise gaslighting those women who did choose to confront. In more than one instance, testimony indicated that reporting of sexual harassment was actively discouraged by global and even 'Fortune 500' corporate organization(s). In more than one narrative, law enforcement had also failed to respond or take seriously a woman's claims. Recurrent testimony also indicated that reporting structures already in place (seemingly to accommodate persons coming forward with instances of harassment or other forms of violence in the workplace) were too public, inadequate, unsafe, and/or highly

skewed toward male-dominated decision-making during adjudication. Women who testified to experiences of sexual violence at home were equally gaslit by their male partners and reported on shared feelings of deep shame and a desire to move on without having to live and re-live the memory of these assaults through our current legal system's pedantic court and prosecutorial/victim-blaming culture.

Normalized Micro-Aggression. Several interviewees spoke about feeling 'silly' for harboring shame and resentment over acts such as unwanted kissing, touching, or off-hand sexual commentary in the workplace; actions which, while not physically harmful, caused them to feel patronized and disempowered in front of their colleagues. Acts of such micro-aggression were universally apparent in the discourse of each interviewee. Equally universal was the entrenched sense that disclosing these within current power structures would make someone into a 'tattle tale' or 'that person' (assumedly someone that one does not want to be known as). Yet all respondents also agreed that normalization of gender micro-aggression in any space should be viewed as a precursor to the normalization of other forms of gender-based violence. Once again, systemic and ongoing rape culture played a significant role in perpetuating these norms such that each of the women interviewed continued to feel responsible for their own loss of agency; despite cerebral awareness of an over-arching and socio-political patriarchy surrounding them. Clear internalization of blame.

Systemic Acceptance of Rape Culture. For all female interviewees—participants and experts alike—frustration and anger at a culture steeped in normative violence against women, without consequence to perpetrators, was a key factor in their decision to participate with #MeToo. While every participant had heard of rape culture prior to the #MeToo movement, and each considered themselves a feminist, each also agreed (individually, through their testimony) that knowledge of inequitable gender-bias in our systems did not preclude those biased systems from

maintaining dominance or power over women, even today. In more than one interview, the subject of a ‘post-#MeToo-era’ was discursively debunked. Participants were united in their desire to see change, but unsure how best to achieve it safely, without significant backlash to themselves or their sister-activists. Likewise, interviewees in this study universally indicated that, despite #MeToo’s progress, they felt the current landscape continued to be unsafe for women.

Inclusivity Through Simplicity. Perhaps the most inclusive element of the #MeToo movement was its simplicity for participants. Without explanation or judgement, all one needed to do was post the simple word ‘#MeToo’ in order to hold space within the conversation and to receive support therein. For many of this study’s interviewees, it was this simplicity and the ease with which partaking seemed possible that initially compelled them to post online. In some cases, all they initially posted was #MeToo. Yet, uniting all testimony was a theme of feeling like there were no qualifying or exclusionary components to the movement, in the way other hashtags like #BeenRapedNeverReported or #WhyIStayed may have implied. No gatekeepers surrounded #MeToo. That facility became critical to the success of the movement as a growing number of women swelling into a tidal wave of voices provided even greater motivation to victims who finally decided to share.

Sharing our Truth to Power Matters. There was no disagreement between interviewees that sharing their truth might be a powerful tool for galvanizing other women and affecting potential collectivist change. Whether they initially chose to share their narratives in testimonial spaces like blogs, on social media, or within the context of other groups with more potential for anonymity, like Facebook, each of this study’s participant women agreed that they chose to share because the act of ‘putting it out there’ might manifest in it reaching someone who needed to hear they are not alone. In instances where calling out attackers or harassers could incur greater negative consequence for marginalized groups than those with more privilege, all women in the study group

agreed that those with greater privilege might (should) also consider taking on more of the initial ‘risk’. Informed consent, however, was key to any decision wherein a woman might choose to take on such personal risk, regardless of her intersection. Thus, a caveat that no one feel pressured, compelled or otherwise bullied to share, nor shamed over a personal choice not to was unilaterally espoused. To that end, it seems, there is no right or wrong answer when it comes to the question of whether to come forward and expose one’s personal experience(s) with rape culture. This study did note that for each woman who chose to go public, a sense of empowerment accompanied a sense of lingering fear over potential future backlash. Given some women who initially signed up for the study also backed out of sharing after their interviews, it is also important to note that agency over the withdrawal of one’s personal narrative from any group narrative should be maintained wherever possible in order for future women and girls to feel safe expressing their stories.

Systemic Racial Disparity Through Texts and Institutions. Of those interviewed for this documentary study, each BIPOC woman indicated a significantly heightened level of anxiety and fear over reporting publicly. More than one subsequently asked for their interview not to be used in the documentary, despite having initially expressed a desire to come forward and be heard. No withdrawals were recorded for women who identified as non-BIPOC. Important thematic information to capture. As Dr. Safia Noble (2014) discusses in several of her scholarly articles, including *Race, Media, and the Politics of Spectacle*, it is not uncommon, but rather a norm that systemic racism is fundamental to the reasons why BIPOC are less inclined to opt into systems which purport to ‘help’ those facing violence or stigmatization. Indeed, deeply entrenched inequities favouring cis, white, hetero norms in power and privilege continue to apply to all mass political actions or protest engagements in today’s world, digital or otherwise. Dr. Noble points out that “pervasive personal and institutional racism by whites that presume inferiority of blacks

remains at the core of racial disparity in the reporting and prosecution of violence toward black America” (p. 12).

Confounding Factors & Limitations

As a feminist study, the data represented in this thesis was intersected by more than one hegemonic social consideration, including an inherent gender bias in utilizing theoretical paradigms historically designed, in large part, by male scholars (Allen, 2011). Critics of Narrative Analysis also cite its subjectivity, vis-a-vis the possibility that meanings may be distorted by direct and collaborative interaction between participants and researchers (Woodiwiss, Smith & Lockwood, 2017). The ongoing possibility for retaliatory consequences (both social and/or professional) toward each of the women who participated also remained an ever-present issue, given the continued and present influence of our persistently patriarchal culture. Despite consenting to come forward and appear in the film, all the women in this study expressed ongoing concerns relating to what might happen after going public with their testimony. These included losing current positions in the workplace, being blacklisted from opportunities for forward advancement, and of potential physical repercussions, including violence against their person. Where larger and wealthier corporate entities were alluded to as complicit, more than one study participant indicated concern over a potential legal backlash.

Indeed, these concerns remain valid, and researchers who choose to stand behind the testimony of survivors of hegemonic harassment, assault or violence can (and do) concurrently shoulder a risk of litigation when making allegations public as well. Yet in support of further research toward these ends and in order to continue to expose systemic inequity and ongoing patriarchal systems within our culture, it is this researcher’s opinion that the potential for change is ultimately worth those risks. Without risking backlash from systemic oppressors, there can be no long-term exposure and amplification of truth to power.

Throughout the study's recruitment process, maintaining informed consent between myself and each of the participants was relatively straightforward. All requisite papers were signed and each interview as entirely voluntary and successful. However, maintaining ongoing consent at every stage of the filmmaking process thereafter presented as more challenging than initially anticipated. As each woman began to consider her participation and eventually 'watch' her story on camera, requests did come in for the exclusion of certain narrative components previously discussed. One participant asked for her true name not to be cited. Another requested her face not be used in film posters or advertisements, though she agreed to remain in the documentary. Despite their having signed (otherwise legal) agreements to allow these, I felt it was not in the interest of the study objectives herein to defy anyone's sense of agency, nor to compel them to put forward testimony or representation which they were uncomfortable with, so I did comply with all such requests, requiring more than one re-edit to the resulting film. Noteworthy that every study participant did indicate satisfaction and even a sense of empowerment and excitement over the final cut of the film, as finally submitted.

The opt-in nature of this study attempted take into consideration further increased potential risk to real-world consequence or backlash toward groups marginalized beyond gender (by race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.), however given the withdrawal of three BIPOC subjects from the non-cis-white-hetero interviewee demographic (due to fear over potential future professional repercussions), it became clear that these risks and fears were indeed more prominently represented in demographics from disenfranchised groups. This resulted in a somewhat narrower range of cultural and ethnic diversity than initially hoped for among those volunteers willing to opt in after recruitment.

Finally, the potentially ephemeral and often 'slacktivist' nature of hashtag activism (Chen, Pain, et al., 2018) is worth noting. As Dr. Jill Andrew (2019) eloquently pointed out during her

interview with me for the documentary, one cannot simply “press a button or donate a dollar,” in order to fix long-standing dangerous hegemonic and systemic socio-cultural toxicities. In their book, *Hashtag Feminism: Activism or Slacktivism*, sociology scholars Chen, Pain, et al., (2018) discuss the ways in which social media “provides a potent tool to give voice to the marginalized and silenced, and thus, contributes to social media’s role in fomenting social justice” (p. 198). Yet these same potentialities are purchased at the expense of a false sense of efficacy; a sense that one’s “very small actions online, such as posting a hashtag, may always have greater meaning than they do ... thereby embracing the concept of ‘slacktivism,’ which is engaging in low-cost, low-risk online activism” (p. 199). Their findings on feminist digital activism provide evidence that there is indeed a necessity for continued academic study and discussion as it applies to hashtags used in modern-day protest, from a distinctly post-modern feminist perspective.

Due to timing, budgetary and geographical constraints, all in-person interviews for this study also took place within the province of Ontario. Had there been more budget and time, this would have been a national, or even international representation. Given the more limited scope of this thesis, however, my hope was to lay the foundation for future (broader) inquiries which might span multiple geographic intersections and potential participant cultures—resulting in more generalizable data. As a film, #MeAfterToo retains a focus both narrow and deep in order to respect, document, and analyze each lived experience explored.

Recommendations—A Feminist Future

Transforming a global culture which normalizes gender power inequity and violence against women is not a task which any single group can quickly achieve; nor even a single generation. As indicated or alluded to by each of the experts and testimonials who spoke during the documentary process, better education is imperative. A more robust education, as widely accessible as social media itself, over what constitutes harassment, rape-culture, consent, and even rape, must occur not

only among women (or those who identify as women), but among all spectrums of gender identity, and within every intersection. Thereafter, a complete dismantling of current patriarchal systems and male-favoring hegemonic practices is requisite before any new system(s) may even begin to be implemented.

It is inarguable that the challenge of dismantling systems of patriarchy—entrenched for hundreds (if not thousands) of years—is a much more complicated process than any one hashtag call-to-action may achieve. #MeToo lent a shorthand to millions of women; a space to be heard, supported, and perhaps most importantly, to lend support and demand action for change. As a hashtag protest disruptor, it was, perhaps the first digital feminist battlecry to result in the toppling of real-world patriarchs from systems of entrenched power, on a worldwide scale. Hundreds of attackers and harassers lost their positions, others were forced to step down. It was a start, perhaps even the start of a revolution in the way we look to digital counterpublic spaces for more powerful means of feminist mobilization.

My hope is that future studies include more in-depth documentation of individual narratives from female-identified persons worldwide. Especially women from disenfranchised groups. A future documentary might move forward to examine an even larger or more globalized group and discuss the ways in which a respect for and amplification of intersectional women's narratives are more vital than ever to feminist progress. Questions concerning a consensus on the format for and type of education required to affect successful forward momentum (drawing upon the assistance of male allies) are also still largely unanswered. Further, private groups of women currently sharing in less public digital spaces may be approached and asked to discuss the ways in which their smaller community interactions within these spaces may have led to positive change outside of or offline from same.

We are far from nearing any semblance of a “finish line.” As feminist scholar Roxanne Gay eloquently pointed out in her 2018 Op-Ed for *The New York Times*, “despite everything we know about the prevalence of sexual assault and harassment today, women are still not believed. Their experiences are still minimized. And the male perpetrators of these crimes are given all manner of leniency” (Gay, R., 2018, p. 1). Especially and continually true for BIPOC women.

Delving into the deep emotional traumas of women affected by violence, harassment and assault was simultaneously a privilege and a challenging journey. As a survivor, myself, digital hashtag activism has long been an outlet for my own feminist participation with discourse and calling out patriarchal paradigms. In the aftermath of this documentary case study, it seems clear that #MeToo presented many women with an unprecedentedly accessible support group, alongside a glimpse of hope for change. As a hashtag protest, I believe it likely that #MeToo will sustain in some form, expand, and ultimately evolve. Looking forward, the movement may be reviewed as both an emergent and successful digital protest/disruptor, and an amplification strategy for the use of collectivism within social media spaces in order to bolster individual narratives and support important feminist discourse. Yet the march toward a global disavowal of problematic patriarchal systems is only burgeoning. Groundswells like #MeToo within a tumultuous and grander feminist journey are a firebrand for incoming digital feminist activists—propelling us all to plug in, learn more, judge less, and rise up—taking both digital and physical/offline action forward in order to dismantle patriarchy. Today and for every generation who follows, hashtag protests like #MeToo will present as important and unignorable components of a process through which activists may continue to collaborate on the progressive architecture of a truly feminist future.

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