

# A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE THROUGH THE #MeToo MOVEMENT

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Weinstein, Cosby, O'Reilly, Ailes, Spacey, Bush—all names added to a list that is changing how people are talking about sexual assault. “Sensational stories of rape are no longer confined to tabloids but are now part of ‘normal,’ ‘everyday’ news for a large section of the population.”<sup>1</sup> The age of online and social media sites has altered not only when and how people get news but redefined what is and is not public. The #MeToo movement appeared on Twitter in the fall of 2017 in the aftermath of the Weinstein allegations and spurred several other male Hollywood power players to face similar allegations. These “Silence Breakers” went on to claim the 2017 Person of the Year cover of *Time* magazine for “giving voice to open secrets, for moving whisper networks onto social networks, for pushing us all to stop accepting the unacceptable.”<sup>2</sup> I argue that the #MeToo movement confronts the issues of sexual assault and consent within the public sphere by providing a space for those impacted by the rape culture to counter the dominant discourse and potentially alter the future narrative.

#MeToo works to create a broader understanding of violence and the relationship between sex and power within the contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Barnett, “Framing Rape: An Examination of Public Relations Strategies in the Duke University Lacrosse Case.” *Communication, Culture & Critique*, no. 1 (2008): 179, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-9137.2008.00018.x>.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Felsenthal, “The Choice.” *New York Times*, December 28, 2017, <http://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-2017-silence-breakers-choice/>.

public sphere. The hashtag prompts what Sowards and Renegar call a “consciousness-raising,” which is “central to the process of creating a critical awareness of our culture.”<sup>3</sup> The worldwide attention Twitter provides for the topic of sexual violence reveals in a public way, the scale of the problem and need for a cultural change. This essay explores how the presence of interpersonal, social, and association validation brings sexual assault from the shadows to the center of public conversation where the silenced refuse to be silenced anymore. First, I will examine how #MeToo grants interpersonal validation to sexual assault victims by providing a place for sharing stories and support. Then I will look at how the hashtag socially validates sexually assault as a cultural issue. Finally, I will illustrate how those critiquing #MeToo are validating it through association.

### **#MeToo: Emerging and Evolving**

#MeToo has pushed the topic of sexual assault and harassment to the forefront of conversation, reaching millions of people in more than 80 countries since Alyssa Milano resurrected the hashtag in October of 2017. In a Twitter post, the actress, explained that if all the women who have been sexually assaulted or harassed used #MeToo “we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.”<sup>4</sup> While Milano’s tweet encouraged many hereunto silent or silenced to share their experiences with assault and harassment, #MeToo was first created in 2007 by activist Tarana Burke as a way to support women of color who have survived sexual assault. Burke told *Ebony* “it wasn’t built to be a viral campaign or hashtag that is here today and forgotten tomorrow. It was a catchphrase to be used from survivor to survivor to let folks know that they were not alone and that a movement for radical healing was happening and possible.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Stacey K. Sowards and Valerie R. Renegar, “The Rhetorical Functions of Consciousness-Raising in Third Wave Feminism,” *Communication Studies* 55, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 535.

<sup>4</sup> Alyssa Milano, Twitter post, October 15, 2017, 2:21pm, [https://twitter.com/alyssa\\_milano](https://twitter.com/alyssa_milano).

<sup>5</sup> Zahara Hill, “A Black Woman Created the “Me Too” Campaign Against Sexual Assault 10 Years Ago,” *Ebony*, October 18, 2017,

Compounded with what began with Burke, Milano's tweet has acted as a call to action for people to speak up and "stand in solidarity with other survivors."<sup>6</sup> With around 32,000 replies in 24 hours to Milano's tweet, Milano told *Time* magazine, it seemed to only be an "opening of the floodgates."<sup>7</sup> Suddenly there was a place for survivors to challenge the culture of secrets and silence and stereotypes. The rebirth of #MeToo created a public dialogue about the issue of sexual assault and harassment that acknowledged people's experiences and united millions through a viral conversation that had previously been reduced to whispers.

Since the initial tweet encouraging the use of #MeToo, the hashtag has not only filtered through Hollywood but made its way into Congress and beyond U.S. borders. Rep. Jackie Speier "encouraged Capitol Hill staffers to share their stories using the hashtag #MeTooCongress."<sup>8</sup> #MeToo also took on many forms across the world as it crossed language barriers, including #BalanceTonPorc, #YoTambien and #Ana\_kaman. A broader understanding of violence and the relationship between sex and power within the contemporary public sphere has been created by the conversation spurred by the hashtag. #MeToo is important because it is an example of a changing public sphere and of a potential permanent shift in the sexual assault discourse. It illustrates a, "willingness to engage in behaviors against sexual assault in a public opinion climate that many have been

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<https://www.ebony.com/news-views/black-woman-me-too-movement-tarana-burke-alyssa-milano>.

<sup>6</sup> Sandra E. Garcia, "The Woman Who Created #MeToo Long Before Hashtags," *New York Times*, October 20, 2017,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/20/us/me-too-movement-tarana-burke.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Felsenthal, "The Choice." *New York Times*, December 28, 2017, <http://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-2017-silence-breakers-choice/>.

<sup>8</sup> Lucia Graves, "#MeTooCongress: Women in Politics Take Action in Wake of Weinstein," *The Guardian*, November 8, 2017,

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/nov/08/metoocongress-women-in-washington-and-beyond-urge-changes-for-reporting-assault>.

described as a ‘rape culture,’<sup>9</sup> which makes it a valuable resource for studying the process of a feminist counterpublic discourse moving from the fringes of the public, to center stage.

There is a clear linkage between the #MeToo movement and feminist counterpublic discourse that presents a great opportunity for further research. Rhetorical scholars have only recently started to explore the realm of social movements and hashtag activism. Thomas Salek studied firestorming on Twitter with #WoodyAllen and explored the impact of a “sudden discharge of larger quantities of messages containing negative WOM [word of mouth] and complaint behavior against a person, company, or group in social media networks.”<sup>10</sup> However, with #MeToo, the ‘firestorm’ of tweets didn’t seek to disparage a particular person or bombard Twitter with damaging heresy. Rather, the movement seeks to connect people through shared experiences and provide a voice to an important and very real issue. Twitter, like many social networks, is “a means to locate private thoughts in a public setting”<sup>11</sup> and these new ways of communication illustrate how the public and private spheres have changed as well as prompt the need for further research on the impact of discourse in the future. With social media, nothing is safe from being ripped from the shadows and brought into the bright scrutiny of public dialogue. Whether or not #MeToo dismantles the patriarchal power structure, its seemingly overnight ability to move a taboo topic from private sphere to public is something deserving of further examination. As seen with #MeToo, hashtags have power and those who utilize them are the ones who drive that power.

## **Feminist Counterpublic Discourse**

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<sup>9</sup> Cory L. Armstrong and Jessica Mahone, “‘It’s On Us.’ The Role of Social Media and Rape Culture in Individual Willingness to Mobilize Against Sexual Assault,” *Mass Communication and Society* 20, (June 2016): 101, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2016.1185127>.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas A. Salek, “Controversy Trending: The Rhetorical Form of Mia and Ronan Farrow’s 2014 Online Firestorm Against #WoodyAllen,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 9, (2016): 480, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cccr.12123>.

<sup>11</sup> Salek, “Controversy,” 479.

Sexual assault and harassment have not always been discussed in such a public way. Historically rape was not even portrayed as a crime. Though rape is now seen for the violent act it is and is a triable offense, we still live in what Schwartz and DeKeseredy (1997) refer to as a, “‘rape-supportive culture’ which objectifies women and teaches both sexes that women are responsible for men’s violent behaviors.”<sup>12</sup> There has been a “sexist rhetoric”<sup>13</sup> within contemporary culture that undermines victim credibility and aids in constructing certain myths that encourage shared accountability between victim and attacker. Mass media accounts of intoxication, provocative dress, and erotic domination repeatedly reinforce that rhetoric and often go unchallenged. Recurring representations of women’s behavior acting as “triggers for male behavior”<sup>14</sup> perpetuates a gender dominance/dependence hierarchy in which women must “fear men, but they also must rely on men for protection.”<sup>15</sup>

Feminists have continued to fight to redefine sexual violence and shift the surrounding discourse away from victim-blaming. They have gone further to suggest that “rape is a metaphor for oppression in patriarchal culture made possible by social attitudes that regard women as possessions,”<sup>16</sup> which reinforces a “social domination in which men can control women and keep them in fear.”<sup>17</sup> “Previous

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<sup>12</sup> Barbara Barnett, “Framing Rape: An Examination of Public Relations Strategies in the Duke University Lacrosse Case.” *Communication, Culture & Critique*, no. 1 (2008): 181, [https://doi: 10.1111/j.1753-9137.2008.00018.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-9137.2008.00018.x).

<sup>13</sup> Cory L. Armstrong and Jessica Mahone, “‘It’s On Us.’ The Role of Social Media and Rape Culture in Individual Willingness to Mobilize Against Sexual Assault,” *Mass Communication and Society* 20, (June 2016): 101, [https://doi: 10.1080/15205436.2016.1185127](https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2016.1185127).

<sup>14</sup> Barbara Barnett, “Framing Rape: An Examination of Public Relations Strategies in the Duke University Lacrosse Case.” *Communication, Culture & Critique*, no. 1 (2008): 183, [https://doi: 10.1111/j.1753-9137.2008.00018.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-9137.2008.00018.x).

<sup>15</sup> Barnett, “Framing,” 183.

<sup>16</sup> Barnett, “Framing,” 181.

<sup>17</sup> Barnett, “Framing,” 181.

feminist generations have made it clear that the boundaries between public and private sphere must be blurred for women to have a voice<sup>18</sup> and contemporary feminists have realized that in order to break through the oppressive patriarchal culture, they must not only take on a more confrontational approach but challenge the dominant rhetoric of sexual assault on a public stage. Twitter recently provided that stage, from which millions brought the public's attention to the subject of sexual assault.

According to van Dijck (2009), "Twitter allows users a platform to project short messages into the public sphere where they can circulate and constitute a virtual discourse community through collaboration with other users"<sup>19</sup> which allows for potentially emotionally rich discussion that until recently, would've probably found a place outside the public sphere. Public sphere is a place where "citizens come together to share information, to debate, to discuss, or to deliberate on common concerns"<sup>20</sup> but "the growth of mass media has itself changed the way the public sphere functions."<sup>21</sup> "Television and the Internet...have fundamentally transformed the media matrix that constitutes our social milieu, producing new forms of social organization and new modes of perception"<sup>22</sup> that "intensify the speed of communication and obliterate space as a barrier."<sup>23</sup> Social media networks are proof that the line between public and private

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<sup>18</sup> Stacey K. Sowards and Valarie R. Renegar, "Reconceptualizing Rhetorical Activism in Contemporary Feminist Contexts," *The Howard Journal of Communication* 17, (2006): 62, [https://doi: 10.1080/10646170500487996](https://doi.org/10.1080/10646170500487996).

<sup>19</sup> Thomas A. Salek, "Controversy Trending: The Rhetorical Form of Mia and Ronan Farrow's 2014 Online Firestorm Against #WoodyAllen," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 9, (2016): 479, [https://doi: 10.1111/cccr.12123](https://doi.org/10.1111/cccr.12123).

<sup>20</sup> Sorana-Alexandra Constantinescu, "Public sphere and New media Case study: WikiLeaks," *Journal of Media Research* 3, no. 14 (2012): 96.

<sup>21</sup> Constantinescu, "Public," 96.

<sup>22</sup> Kevin Michael DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples, "From Public Sphere to Public Screen: Democracy, Activism, and the "Violence" of Seattle," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19, no. 2 (June 2002): 131.

<sup>23</sup> DeLuca and Peeples, "From," 131.

have been blurred and that anyone with something to say now has a place to say it.

However, “not all people have equal rhetorical power”<sup>24</sup> and for those groups that fail to be represented within the public, there are “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourse to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs”<sup>25</sup> otherwise known as counterpublics. Counterpublics are “oppositional ideologies”<sup>26</sup> that “engage in potentially emancipatory affirmative practice with the hope that power may be reconfigured.”<sup>27</sup> Feminist discourse is counter to the dominant patriarchal power, but social media networks have altered the public sphere in such a way that grants subordinated groups the potential to drive the discursive narrative in ways that they have not been able to in the past.

### Validating a Movement

Twitter users quickly produced a wide-spread and candid discourse on the reality of sexual assault and harassment using #MeToo. Millions have used the #MeToo platform to project their experiences into the public sphere in a way that allowed them to steer the narrative instead of the mainstream media’s long sung tale of victim shaming. Until recently, media coverage, while minimal, reflected the “dominant norms and values in a society”<sup>28</sup> which for years has encouraged a culture of don’t ask/don’t tell, he said/she said when it comes to sexual violence. This shift in understanding is

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<sup>24</sup> Catherine Helen Palczewski, Richard Ice, and John Fritch, *Rhetoric in Civic Life* (State College: Strata Publishing, 2016), 267-268.

<sup>25</sup> Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch, *Rhetoric in Civic Life*, 273.

<sup>26</sup> Stacey K. Sowards and Valarie R. Renegar, “Reconceptualizing Rhetorical Activism in Contemporary Feminist Contexts,” *The Howard Journal of Communication* 17, (2006): 59, [https://doi: 10.1080/10646170500487996](https://doi.org/10.1080/10646170500487996).

<sup>27</sup> Sowards and Renegar, “Reconceptualizing,” 59.

<sup>28</sup> Lauren M. Burch, Evan L. Frederick, and Ann Pegoraro, “Kissing in the Carnage: An Examination of Framing on Twitter During the Vancouver Riots,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 59, no. 3 (2015): 400, [https://doi: 10.1080/08838151.2015.1054999](https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2015.1054999).

due in large part to the movement of the public sphere from something tangible to something virtual, meaning “the community members probably will never know one another face-to-face; however, they may have similar interests.”<sup>29</sup> Survivors and supporters and even critics, can now share experiences and opinions from behind a screen rather than to someone directly. This veil of ‘anonymity’ has the power to produce both more truth and more criticism within a social platform that is “a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself.”<sup>30</sup>

With each tweet using the hashtag, another layer is added to the conversation. Another chapter in the ongoing #MeToo story. Sifting through four days of tweets using #MeToo revealed that while the movement predominantly consisted of language that validated victims of sexual assault, their stories, and courage to come forward, there were those who criticized victim’s hereunto silence and the overall effectiveness of #MeToo as a social movement. While tweets echoing support, optimism, the expectation of silence, validation and various personal narratives vastly outweighed those more negative, doubtful, skeptical and shaming discourses, each use of #MeToo served a purpose. That purpose being to acknowledge sexual violence as a topic worthy of further conversation. The #MeToo movement works to counter the dominant victim-blaming discourse and the ongoing conversation asserts that engaging in the sexual assault dialogue not only validates it as a social issue but validates those affected by it. This idea of validation became an overarching theme throughout the tweets analyzed and each was found to validate #MeToo in some way, from those expressing support to those accusing and critiquing.

### **Interpersonal Validation**

The #MeToo movement on Twitter allows individuals to share their personal stories of sexual assault and their support in a way that is public but avoids the traditional face-to-face

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<sup>29</sup> Sorana-Alexandra Constantinescu, “Public sphere and New media Case study: WikiLeaks,” *Journal of Media Research* 3, no. 14 (2012): 97.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics (abbreviated version),” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88, no. 4 (November 2002): 413.

communication prior to social media networks and the Internet. Twitter and other social media networks easily blur the line of what is public and private. In the case of sexual assault, there's something freeing about putting a story out into the abyss of the Internet especially since it has been a private and socially 'shameful' secret many have held onto for so long. People like Panda // ANIM were encouraged by the hashtag to admit, "I never usually share things like this on twitter, but #MeToo" (@PandaPowerEdits, November 2, 2017). The movement helped Susan Weber find the courage to share "I was in college. Raped by a football player. No one listened-no one cared. #MeToo" as well as Jaiden Lee Williams who tweeted, "#MeToo I finally told my mom last year after 7 years of hiding it from everyone" (@sueweber1, October 15, 2017) (@Jaidenleeee, November 2, 2017). One of the biggest reasons that people felt encouraged to speak up was due to tweets like "It can happen to anyone. It is NEVER your fault. You're not alone. It's happened to #MeToo" (@TheShowOff85, October 15, 2017). The Twitter movement went viral not because the experiences victims shared were necessarily new information, but because it gave people a platform to talk about and support victims in a new way.

In the past, the kind of interpersonal support victims of sexual violence received took place in private, within friend groups, families, support groups, and in private online forums. The #MeToo movement opened those private conversations to the public which created an outpouring of support for those affected. Tweets like, "Whichever way your body chose to respond during and after the trauma helped you survive and cope. It never indicates weakness or blame," work to counter a history of victim-blaming discourse (@CalmCollectiveP, October 16, 2017). The Calm Collective was not alone in their response as others like Miss Kitty tweeted, "The thing is that you are perfect, fucking brilliant and pure magic. You are not wrong, or bad, or asking for it. #MeToo" (@Cerridwensheart, November 1, 2017). This supportive language was one of the most popular uses of the hashtag as people came together to validate victims' experiences in a public way that had not, to this degree, been done before.

There was a rich pattern of belief and support discourse that continued throughout the movement where people encouraged victims to keep sharing, that they were believed, and not alone in

what they had been forced to deal with. Stee Loves Mere tweeted “Support victims. Believe their stories. Listen. Be supportive. Hold the monsters who did these things accountable” and Barbara Stojanovic shared “2those sharing: I’m so damn proud of you! 2those who still can’t: I <3 u & I’m not the only one! Ur most definitely not alone,” which were just a couple examples of the support for those affected by an issue that has long plagued our culture (@tidalwavestylr, October 15, 2017) (@barbarastoja, October 15, 2017). Gillian Falchnie reminded people that “you should know that it’s incredibly difficult for any woman to come forward with an allegation. No-one does it lightly” because though people are speaking up now, for so long sexual assault has been about male power and victim blaming (@GillianF, November 1, 2017).

## Social Validation

Through the #MeToo movement victims of sexual assault are not only getting their experiences validated and finding support for their struggles, but the public is unifying to confirm that the rape culture needs to change. HeForShe tweeted an image of a quote from @MattMcGorry saying “We need to not only speak out against abuse, but also demonstrate how our culture perpetuates and normalizes this violence through sexist jokes, ‘locker room talk,’ slut shaming, and talking about women in dehumanizing ways”<sup>31</sup> (@HeForShe, November 1, 2017). Barbara spoke about the breadth of the issue in a tweet saying, “You’d have a hard time finding a woman who hasn’t been sexually harassed, at work, school, or basically anywhere.” (@liszella, October 15, 2017). The immense scale of the issue not only disappointed and saddened people, but many seemed surprised by how many were impacted.

Many people used #MeToo to confront their experiences of shaming and silencing in the past, proving that it was not that sexual assault was not happening, it was that no one was talking about it or confronting it. Sarah Ann Masse called for action, tweeting “#MeToo Obviously. And basically every woman I know. No one should be surprised. Stop being surprised. Start doing something”

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<sup>31</sup> HeForShe, “By @MattMcGorry #HeForShe #MeToo. From: [bit.ly/MMcGorry](https://bit.ly/MMcGorry).” Twitter Photo, November 1, 2017.

(@SarahAnnMasse, October 15, 2017). This call for action and change was echoed throughout the movement with some calling out the bystanders like Irsa saying, “#Weinstein is scum but so r all the bystanders who knew & didn’t tell,” while people like James Melville argued that “for real change to happen, it requires men to genuinely stand together with women” (@sdrloo2, October 16, 2017) (@JamesMelville, November 1, 2017). Many also used the hashtag to confront how they were treated when they had talked about their experience with sexual violence in the past. Victoria Derbyshire shared how “Over a period of months I was sexually harassed by one of my managers. I threatened to report him then I was sacked.” (@VictoriaLIVE, November 1, 2017) Scott Schmidt also spoke out admitting, “Spoke. Ignored. Spoke. Ridiculed. Spoke. Punished. Spoke. Turned away. Silent. Spoke. ‘Why did you take so long to speak up?’” (@scott\_schmidt\_c, November 2, 2017). Tweets like these speak to the victim-blaming and silencing way assault was handled previously, and sparked tweets like Joan d’Arc saying, “just because it happens every day, does not make it okay” which turned into questions about what can be done to change the rape culture (@JoanArc1936, October 16, 2017).

Conversations went beyond victim support to confront the public about how to make real tangible change happen, implying that the #MeToo conversation is only the beginning. White Ribbon Canada asked, “How can we work together to prevent sexual violence & sexual harassment?” and UN Women asked, “How can we use this social campaign to drive social change?” (@whiteribbon, November 2, 2017) (@UN\_Women, October 31, 2017). Anna Amy Ho took the opportunity to voice the issue of consent, tweeting “Let’s hash out what #consent really looks like in real life,” which spoke to a societal miscommunication on what is and is not consensual behavior – a large contributor to the sexual violence epidemic (@AnnaAmyHo, November 2, 2017). There were multiple examples like these of praise for ‘finally talking about it’ and a popular question of ‘how do we fix this’ which, while spurring many into action, created a sense of skepticism from others.

## **Association Validation**

While there has been a widespread amount of support and positivity surrounding the #MeToo movement, not everyone is entirely on board. For those who did not voice support, their issues lay either with victims or the movement itself. Far Rainbow Dash criticized victims' choice to come forward online saying, "don't tell me you're 'too scared' to come forward about being raped, when you'll happily do so on Twitter for millions of people to see" (@FarRight\_Dashie, October 15, 2017). Others seemed to direct their critique toward the #MeToo movement itself, asking things like "Y do you need a hashtag to openly talk about your sexual assault?" or questioning the impact some feel the hashtag will have tweeting, "This #MeToo thing won't do what people think it will. Just make a bunch of people feel like they made a difference" (@lilith\_blank, October 16, 2017) (@WWWeaver, October 15, 2017). Regardless of how these criticisms are intended, they actually further validate the issue by recognizing and responding to something that has previously been silenced and ignored.

By speaking up and engaging in the #MeToo conversation, they are confirming that sexual assault is worth talking about and are contributing to the public conversation. So, when people like Spiked tweet "how ridiculous the #MeToo hysteria has become," and Senti Sojwal says how "tired and sad and exhausted by all of this" they are and "how many times do we have to yell the same shit over and over," all they are doing is continuing the conversation and reiterating its cultural importance (@spikedonline, November 1, 2017) (@senti\_narwhal, October 16, 2017). They are going out of their way to critique something they claim is not doing anything, but by doing so they are saying that it is in fact doing something. Ultimately, #MeToo has proven to compel even those opposed to it to talk about an issue that until recently has been pushed to the fringes of public discourse and allowed go unchanged.

The #MeToo movement not only provides a public platform for sexual assault to be discussed to a degree it has not been before, but it gives victims a united voice, a wide response of support, and validates sexual violence as a cultural issue. #MeToo puts a spotlight on those impacted by sexual assault and drags those doing the harassing under the microscope. No matter what people are saying, they are using the hashtag to say it and by doing so the conversation keeps happening. As long as the conversation continues, the sexist

rhetoric, victim blaming and shaming, and culture of rape can begin to change for future generations.

### **Contribution to Rhetorical Theory**

The above findings indicate a relationship between how social media popularizes counterpublic discourse, and how association validation has the potential to keep hashtags like #MeToo relevant and impactful. This relationship is something that warrants further research as it points to an obvious change in the public sphere that will impact the future of public and counterpublic discourse, as well as alter the definition of what is and is not private. “Counterpublic theory challenges the idea that a single, universal public sphere is an ideal toward which a diverse society should strive”<sup>32</sup> because a “universal public sphere intensifies the subordination of marginal groups’ needs.”<sup>33</sup> #MeToo, in the same way, challenges the idea that sexual assault and harassment is something that should stay silent and the movement’s driving force is association validation.

The analysis revealed a considerable amount of evidence that sexual assault victims’ needs have not been met under the patriarchal public sphere. Feminist discourse has a history of being subverted in favor of the dominant patriarchal culture, however, the “consciousness-raising”<sup>34</sup> of social movements like #MeToo, which has worked to “enable women to share personal experiences of gender discrimination,”<sup>35</sup> counters that of the patriarchal culture in a public way that promises real change. Social media networks move public conversation away from elite groups in coffee houses to online platforms that are open to everyone. Networks like Twitter have created this public screen of sorts which acts as a “supplement to the

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<sup>32</sup> Catherine Helen Palczewski, Richard Ice, and John Fritch, *Rhetoric in Civic Life* (State College: Strata Publishing, 2016), 276.

<sup>33</sup> Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch, *Rhetoric in Civic Life*, 276.

<sup>34</sup> Stacey K. Sowards and Valerie R. Renegar, “The Rhetorical Functions of Consciousness-Raising in Third Wave Feminism,” *Communication Studies* 55, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 535.

<sup>35</sup> Sowards and Renegar, “The Rhetorical Functions,” 535.

public sphere”<sup>36</sup> and has become the “current place for participatory democracy.”<sup>37</sup> These social platforms are designed for communication and encourage responses or comments, reactions or likes, retweets and the sharing of information.

This modern culture of likes and retweets quickly created a new breed of hashtags referred to as viral. Not every hashtag reaches this status of rapid sharing, yet #MeToo seemingly achieved it overnight. In a time when survivors had finally had enough, “social media acted as a powerful accelerant”<sup>38</sup> spreading the hashtag and its message across the world quick enough to turn heads. However, the #MeToo impact would not be nearly as powerful if only those who had experienced assault were the ones using it. What elevated this hereunto whispered conversation to viral status was not the magnitude of survivor stories, but that in combination with the support and criticism of everyone else. #MeToo maintains three ingredients that keep it relevant months later: a place to report abuse for survivors, the support of the public, and the voice of the skeptics. The doubters and critics establish an important validation for social movements like #MeToo, which differentiate it from support groups and help provide recognition to topics that have long been neglected in the dominate public sphere. Every conversation worth having has more than one side and the #MeToo conversation continues due to its multifaceted nature.

It is important to note that social media and hashtag activism have changed and will continue to change where people are communicating and what they choose to divulge. The conversation prompted by #MeToo proves a shift “from a one-way mode of communication to a more collaborative experience”<sup>39</sup> due largely in

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<sup>36</sup> Kevin Michael DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples, “From Public Sphere to Public Screen: Democracy, Activism, and the “Violence” of Seattle,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19, no. 2 (June 2002): 145.

<sup>37</sup> DeLuca and Peeples, “From,” 145.

<sup>38</sup> Edward Felsenthal, “The Choice.” *New York Times*, December 28, 2017, <http://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-2017-silence-breakers-choice/>.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas A. Salek, “Controversy Trending: The Rhetorical Form of Mia and Ronan Farrow’s 2014 Online Firestorm Against

part to social platforms like Twitter. The relationship between the popularization of counterpublic discourse and the validation of hashtag impact uncovered by the analysis of the #MeToo movement through a feminist counterpublic lens, revealed that viral social movements such as this “exist by virtue of being addressed.”<sup>40</sup> With each use of the hashtag users are addressing the topic of conversation and validating it to be worthy of further discussion. However, this validation is only the beginning for movements like #MeToo.

## Conclusion

The future of #MeToo is moving the conversation offline and turning it into tangible change. While there is evidence that it has moved sexual assault into the spotlight of public discourse, reaching trending status on Twitter and sparking international conversation, it is still unclear what permanent change the movement will produce. Sure, it has helped many survivors finally see justice for what happened to them and sparked a trend of increased gender equality, but can it do more? Will this powerful and necessary conversation eventually fade out and allow the victims to once again be silenced? The main goal of a counterpublic is to enact change within the dominant discursive arena. #MeToo has been publicly confronting the stigma of sexual assault to alter the victim-blaming discourse and sexist rhetoric of the rape-supportive culture since the beginning. It is only through the continued bravery of the silence breakers and the validating actions of those positioning themselves within the conversation that social movements like #MeToo will continue to breakdown the status quo and revolutionize the way the public sphere functions.

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#WoodyAllen,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 9, (2016): 483, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cccr.12123>.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics (abbreviated version),” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88, no. 4 (November 2002): 413.

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