

## The Hashtag in Digital Activism: A Cultural Revolution

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### ABSTRACT

The last few years have seen a rise in activism and online technology has caught on this wave of change. More than ever, conversations are driven, gatherings are optimised, and thoughts are shared through a disproportionately small tool compared to its impact: the hashtag. Despite extensive academic research on the hashtag's role in the development of social movements, hitherto there has been little written on its cultural importance. This article aims to address this specific gap in the analysis of digital activism tools by examining the cultural dimension of the hashtag in digital activism. The research relies on the #MeToo movement as the case study for a discourse analysis of the conversation surrounding the hashtag in written media online. Set within a cultural studies perspective, the article discusses the symbolic role played by the hashtag in the emerging myth around the movement through the #MeToo narrative shaped by the victims, supporters or opponents of the movement. Looking at the hashtag's representation and mechanics, the article then allows for the reading of the hashtag as a cultural object that perpetuates the movement's political agenda in the public sphere and bridges personal and collective experiences under the #MeToo myth. Essentially, the article aims to contribute to the broader conversation on the place of digital tools in our construction of reality by theorising that hashtags in digital activism can be read as a driver of change due to their cultural impact on the public imaginary around social movements prevalent on social media.

**Keywords:** discourse analysis, hashtag, digital activism, #MeToo, cultural studies

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past eight years hashtags have come to capture the zeitgeist of our time. From #RefugeesWelcome to #JeSuisCharlie and more recently #MeToo, the hashtag has surpassed its initial role of labelling online content on Twitter and has become evocative of a collective narrative, shared ideals and greater conversations around social movements globally, establishing them in the public imaginary. How something so small and seemingly banal as a hashtag can become such an easily recognisable element for people to feel connected to is worth investigating. This paper sets out to do this by examining the cultural dimension of the hashtag in digital activism.

Discourse has historically played a key role in bringing people together to discuss societal problems and push for political action. However, from the Women's Suffrage to Civil Rights social movements this perpetuation of ideas was mostly bound to the physical space, embodied by speeches, marches or demonstrations and represented by signs or posters. The rise of the Internet and use of social media platforms during the Arab Spring protests in 2011 opened up the online space to protesters and followers alike. People around the world have since been using hash-tagged words or phrases to facilitate digitally networked protests and spread a specific cause on social media in what is now known as hashtag activism. As a versatile way of managing tasks and amplifying social agendas, it has enabled activists to "act as their own media, conduct publicity campaigns, circumvent censorship, and coordinate nimbly" (Tufekci, 2017: xxvi). It facilitates discussions about social issues with real effects in society in

a virtual space whose retrieval, unless otherwise restricted, need not be time or location bound. Since protesters are using the hashtag to unite and amplify their messages, challenging the status quo, they are essentially transforming hashtag-led discourse into a form of virtual resistance amplifying the often still present physical one. As an increasingly visible example of the broad phenomenon of digital activism, hashtag activism lends itself to the current debates of optimist, pessimist, or persistent theorists (Joyce, 2010).

Optimist theorists support digital activism for its technological potential in uniting dispersed groups of people under one cause, allowing them to push for collective action more effectively than in the past (Shirky, 2008). By enabling efficient communication between grassroots and institutional groups, it helps shape public expression and build awareness on social issues, directly benefiting democracy (Karatzogianni, 2016). Critics, however, see digital activism as online support lacking real change in what is called ‘slacktivism’ or ‘clicktivism’ (Anscheutz, 2015). They criticise it for favouring a detached position of the user from the reality of the social problems and for relying extensively on stories that struggle to drive meaningful action. Finally, the persistents can be optimistic or pessimistic about activism, but disregard digital technology as significant for its functioning. They view the future of activism as a blend of digital and offline practices, dependent on the ability of activists to leverage the digital tools’ effectiveness (Hill, 2013).

Despite a rich literature on digital activism, few accounts have in fact focused on hashtag activism specifically. When discussing the use of the hashtag in digital activism, most papers rely on an analysis of the technological logics and mechanics of the hashtag. While some of them look at the role of hashtag in network formation through technological studies on social influence (González-Bailón, 2014) or information virality (Wang, Liu, and Gao, 2016), others explore the linguistic patterns of hashtag formation on Twitter (Posch, Singer, Wagner, and Strohmaier, 2013) or its political and communications functionalities (Davis, 2013). Thus, most of the conversation on digital activism, and hashtag activism in particular, seems to focus on two key areas: the technological role of the hashtag as a mechanism for driving movements and the legislative, real-life change brought by digital activism. Reasonably, a better understanding of the hashtag’s mechanics could make social movements more efficient and potentially more effective in changing societal structures through policy or legislation. However, the cultural impact of digital activism remains for the most part ignored.

Two notable exceptions are the works of Yang and Bruns & Burgess. Yang (2016: 14) examines narratives as a neglected form of agency in digital activism and argues that “the capacity to create stories on social media by using hashtags in a way that is collective and recognised by the public” can have moral, political, and social implications. Bruns and Burgess (2011) discuss the use of hashtags in digital movements from a media studies perspective, touching upon the cultural workings of imagined communities online as representative of the ad hoc publics formed around a specific hashtag. While these works approach original cultural questions on hashtags, a more complex analysis of the symbolic dimensions of the hashtag through its use, representation and perception in digital activism remains for the most part insufficiently explored. Gerbaudo and Treré (2015) blamed this on a favouring of quantitative analysis in digital activism over a qualitative one that would get to the roots of cultural and symbolic processes.

This paper aims to address this specific gap by examining the cultural role of hashtags in digital activism: what they stand for, how they are represented and how their image is perceived and passed on. At the core of this analysis lies the work of Roland Barthes on the creation of myths. In his most popular work, *Mythologies*, Barthes (2009) examines how popular ideas are stripped of their meaning - often political in nature- and then repackaged and imbued with new meaning in order to create myths that carry different political implications in an accessible form for mass consumption. Applying these mechanisms to digital activism, hashtags are emerging as key elements of social movements but once these movements burst into popularity, hashtags take on a life of their own and shape back the movement they helped build. Less interested in the political realm discussed by Barthes and focusing more on the cultural mechanisms, this paper will examine the transformational journey of the hashtag from a tool facilitating action to the face of a movement to eventually becoming a cultural object for public consumption.

Perhaps one of the most mediatised examples of hashtag activism in recent years, the #MeToo movement will serve as the case study for this paper. #MeToo emerged as a response to the sexual harassment scandal involving high-profile Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein and saw numerous celebrities speak up about the abuse they experienced at the hands of the film mogul, leading to him being brought to justice. A general sense of unrest regarding women’s rights and a rising feminist sentiment helped the movement become viral through a simple phrase: ‘me too’. This led to the highly circulated #MeToo hashtag whose cultural impact changed the conversation around sexual violence – encompassing harassment, assault or misconduct allegations – and encouraged women to speak up about their experiences. Several academics have written about #MeToo examining its impact in driving feminist digital activism (Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller, 2018) or analysing the issues it raised while making feminism a popular topic (Tambe, 2018). While the role of #MeToo in gender, sexualisation or feminist studies is important, this article will not discuss the movement as a form of feminist activism. Rather, the article uses

#MeToo to explore the broader cultural mechanics of the hashtag in digital activism. This is due to the emblematic role played by the hashtag in the public imaginary and its widespread adoption around the world and across numerous industries (Google Trends, 2018).

Thus, the paper aims to theorize that the hashtag in digital activism can be read as a myth whose cultural impact helps perpetuate the movement's political agenda in the public imaginary. Relying on a discourse analysis of #MeToo coverage in written media, the first part of the paper is mostly anchored in language, offering a semiotic analysis of the symbolic role played by the hashtag, its meaning and the emergence of the myth around the movement through the #MeToo narrative communicated in the media. The second part of the paper then opens up the discussion to a larger body of cultural studies concepts. By looking at how the hashtag's place, representation and mechanics evolve in culture, the paper advances the reading of the hashtag as a cultural object that bridges personal and collective experiences under the #MeToo myth.

## THE RECKONING

**Figure 1.** Milano, A. (Alyssa\_Milano). 15 October 2017, 9:21 p.m. Tweet

### Methodology

In October 2017, the #MeToo phrase-turned-hashtag was trending not only on Twitter, but also in the media. In under half a year, it evolved from a mere online tool into the emblem of a revolutionary movement against sexual harassment. The research relies on discourse analysis as the most suitable way for a cultural exploration of the hashtag as a myth and draws upon online media articles over the first six months of the unfolding of the #MeToo movement given the large following it received. Using online media publications to analyse a social media phenomenon is perhaps not exactly desirable as it can limit the understanding of the role of the hashtag among the communities actively employing it. Nevertheless, it makes a qualitative assessment of the #MeToo discourse possible where the high volumes of daily #MeToo tweets would have been difficult to analyse at a macro level through solely qualitative work. The research can never do justice to the cumulative number of varied and complex responses, but it will highlight some dominant tropes in the #MeToo discourse. The impact of media discourse on building the myth around #MeToo in the public imaginary is, however, the main strength of this approach. This follows through on Kligler-Vilenchik's (2011) observation that collective memory is best shaped at the intersection of the media memory and the public memory agendas, the moment when the past events most salient in the media also become those perceived as most important by individuals.

A Google Trends (2018) analysis over this period reveals how the spikes in search activity for #MeToo match the change in media discourse leading to three main stages: confession, recognition, and backlash. The beginning

saw a careful sharing of personal stories in the online public sphere through the use of the hashtag as a confessional tool for driving conversation. The hashtag supported countless stories of sexual harassment, putting, in the case of actresses, new abusers under scrutiny and questioning the ethics of the film industry. Media coverage of this momentum led to a recognition phase. TIME's Person of the Year was awarded to the collective of women who spoke up. Time's Up initiative was created to support sexually abused women in taking legal action. These acknowledged the power of the movement, spreading it to women of all walks of life. However, as the movement became popular, a generalised use of the hashtag for both minor and major accusations led to a backlash. The discourse then started to focus on the failures of the movement and the threat posed to sexuality and interpersonal relations.

The body of research consists of fifty-eight articles in English published between October 2017 and March 2018. These were gathered based on their popularity and relevance from the first two pages of Google search and news results for the key terms 'metoo', '#metoo' or 'Me Too movement' over those six months and in line with the three distinct stages above. The materials were filtered to have an Anglophone focus including only articles from US, UK, Canada or Australia. Relying on online readership volume and search popularity, the body of selected articles is naturally skewed towards US online publications due to the greater traction of the movement and its coverage there. The scope was then narrowed on only those articles that had a mention of the hashtag #MeToo in either their title or referencing it as the main topic of discussion within the body of the article. Overall, the articles compose a robust body of research covering traditional and alternative publications and encompassing opinion, news, features and investigation pieces.

This qualitative assessment does not claim to be comprehensive, but it will hopefully help address the cultural impact of the hashtag from a cultural studies perspective. From the final body of articles, the analysis used a semiotic lens to focus on mentions of the hashtag and of the two sides of a #MeToo story (the abuser and the accuser) to understand both the direct use of the hashtag and of the narrative surrounding it. For the hashtag, the emphasis was put on identifying the descriptors (adjectives or nouns) used to refer to the movement under the '#metoo' hashtag and the actions (expressions containing verbs) assigned to it through personification. For the surrounding narrative, focus was similarly put on analysing the descriptors used to refer to the women and men involved in the movement and the action language assigned to them. These words and phrases were then taken and analysed on a spectrum spanning from utopic to neutral to dystopic connotations in line with the three key stages of the media discourse. Utopia is understood as the "expression of the desire for a better way of being" (Levitas, 2010, p.9), a society where voiced #MeToo ideals are achieved at both a personal and institutional level through justice. By contrast, dystopia is representative of an Orwellian universe where language highlights the potential threats associated with the abuse of power through the movement's agenda. The contrast between utopic and dystopic connotations is reflective of the supportive or antagonistic perspectives surrounding the movement. While the utopic associations have mainly been drawn by media publications, journalists or individuals recognising the cultural and political importance of such a feminist clout, the dystopic ones have appeared as a form of backlash led by a reluctance to recognise the positive groundswell of #MeToo or by a critical perspective over the unexpected popularity of the movement. This is best understood through Professor Banet-Weiser's (2019) work on the relationship between popular feminism and popular misogyny, "where feminism is active in recognising structural inequalities, and misogyny reacts to feminism in increasingly violent and visible ways".

### #MeToo: A Symbol for the Movement

A decade ago, social worker Tarana Burke started a local movement called 'Me Too' out of empathy for sexual harassment victims, declaring that "I know exactly how you feel. That happened to me too" (Google Trends, 2018). Despite her activism, the phrase remained hidden from mainstream culture. However, actress and activist Alyssa Milano's visibility as a celebrity made #MeToo immediately popular and, eventually, the two movements merged around the same iconic phrase. Based on Saussurean semiotics, 'me too' is a sign connecting a signifier and a signified. The phrase represents an acknowledgement of other women's experiences relating to one's own, creating a larger space for identification and a bond between the addresser and the addressee(s). It encompasses solidarity, empathy and self-awareness. Burke's understanding of the term as being "a bold declarative statement that 'I'm not ashamed' and 'I'm not alone'" and "a statement from survivor to survivor that says 'I see you, I hear you, I understand you and I'm here for you or I get it'" (Santiago and Criss, 2017) presents a two-level construction that works as both a personal and interpersonal declaration. Firstly, the phrase on its own has a personal cathartic function of sharing past experiences in order to heal whilst joining the larger conversation to amplify the subject. Secondly, it shows one's support for other women with similar experiences, setting a precedent for future statements.

Following Milano's tweet, women started adding their stories of sexual harassment next to the phrase. This changed the dynamics of 'me too' from subject to enabler of background stories, from a declaration to a confession. As a supporting element, the phrase turned into the hashtag #MeToo, encompassing the concepts and emotions

A.	UTOPIC	NEUTRAL	DYSTOPIC
D E S C R I P T I O N	#MeToo revolution; Bold declarative statement; Rallying cry; A too-perfect meme; Watershed; A sense of blinders being taken off; 'Click' moment; A tsunami; A dam breaking; A transformative moment; Reckoning; Revolution of refusal; A badge of honour; Epiphany; A display of female power; Pro-sex movement just laying the tracks; A version of due process; Righteous exposure of hideous abuse of power; The pink wave crashing over Donald Trump; An umbrella of solidarity; The Post-Weinstein Megaphone of Social Media; Movement for women's empowerment	#MeTooism Acknowledgement; Attempt; #MeToo moment; Statement from survivor to survivor; Social movement; Lens; Confession; #MeToo campaign; A movement that has no formal name; Iteration; Reality or an ideology; Sense of unrest; Period of renegotiating sexual norms; Selective force; A show; A movement of sound, of voices, of volume; Slogan; Old idea	#MeToo bubble; Reversion to attitudes about women; Sex panic; Moral panic; Petition to be forgiven; An unedifying clamour to be included in celebrity suffering; A campaign of public denunciation and summary justice; A conflagration: the monstrous, the cruel, and the simply unlucky; Anti-sex movement gone off the rails; McCarthyism; Witch-hunt; Hysteria, moral panic, hatred of sex, hatred of men; Generalized revolution against the patriarchy; A symptom of a broken legal system; A binary battle; Vigilante justice; Feminism hijacked by melodrama The affirmative-consent and preponderance-of-the-evidence regimes; Revictimization; Emblem for female helplessness; Symptom of something that's wrong
A C T I O N	Takes something that women had long kept quiet about and transforms it into a movement; Uncovering the colossal scale of the problem is revolutionary in its own right; #MeToo revolution spared Woody Allen; The force that is ending his political career is greater than the truth; Catalyzed a movement; Give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem; Using the power of empathy to stomp out shame	Launched a movement; Shift the burden of proof from the accuser to the accused, eliminating the presumption of innocence; Reflecting a collective experience of trauma and injustice	Invites a crackdown; Confused justice with vigilantism; Drive users into escalating states of outrage while exhausting us to the point where we cannot meaningfully act; Inflames a climate of hysteria in which the sexual harassment of women comes to be presented as a routine part of life; Creating a "totalitarian" climate that unfairly punishes men for flirting "insistently or clumsily," infantilizes women and undermines sexual freedom; Chains women to the status of the eternal victim; Turning a bona fide moment of moral accountability into a series of ad hoc and sometimes unproven accusations; Serves to blur the boundaries between rape, nonviolent sexual coercion, and bad, fumbling, drunken sex; Criminalize bad sex and trivialize rape; Encouraged puritanism

**Figure 2.** Language used to refer to the movement under the #MeToo hashtag as both an object of description and a subject of action

relating to it. Its new representative status as the name of the movement clarified the purpose of any stories shared on Twitter. If initially the phrase needed to be contextualised, its increasing usage allowed it to stand on its own as a symbol: a word with a multitude of meanings. Furthermore, its popularity made journalists wonder if #MeToo could evolve from 'a meme' into 'a social movement'. From being 'simply an attempt to get people to understand the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault in society' #MeToo quickly became 'a rallying cry against sexual harassment'. The hashtag eluded the reality of its mechanics and turned from a tool of transmission into a representation of the movement. Although initially considered a mere "part of the picture, but not all of it" (Zacharek, Dockterman & Sweetland Edwards, 2017), the hashtag becomes merged with the social campaign through its symbolic status. The movement is then evoked whenever someone states 'me too', writes #MeToo or shares a '#MeToo story'. This increases the perceived power of the hashtag, lending itself to both utopic and dystopic associations as seen in **Figure 2**.

Utopia is seen as "imaginative, normative, prescriptive, and future-oriented; but it is also very often present-oriented in its descriptive and explanatory depictions and criticisms of utopia's other, the present" (El-Ojeili and Hayden, 2009: 2). On one side, the parallels drawn between #MeToo and natural disasters highlight an exaggerated potency of the movement. Comparing #MeToo to 'a tsunami' or 'a dam breaking, the cumulative effects of harassment claims over decades' (Bennett, 2017a) emphasizes the movement's power outside of human control. Similarly, framing #MeToo as an 'epiphany', 'revelations' or 'a confession, a petition to be forgiven' is reminiscent of spiritual power, divine acts and the hashtag's image as an icon. By detaching the movement from reality and driving it towards a higher purpose, the fight against sexual harassment is seen as part of a supernatural dimension reflective of unfettered human hopes. On the other side, terms like 'reckoning', 'revolution of refusal' or 'pink wave' are utopic in showing a hopeful radical change, yet they are rooted in the everyday dimensions of feminism and women's rights marches. Through such metaphors, the movement comes to occupy an ideological dimension. Being referred to as '#MeTooism' or 'greater than the truth' emphasizes the movement's agenda against sexual harassment and its loyal supporters.

If the utopic dimension presented the hashtag as empowering women to militate for their rights, the dystopic dimension of the backlash period deals with the threat to sexual liberation and fair justice posed by the generalised use of the hashtag. Describing the movement as the '#MeToo bubble' or a 'conflagration: the monstrous, the cruel, and the simply unlucky', the dystopic dimension focuses on detachment of #MeToo accusations from the

reality of those experiences. Although the hashtag can also encompass exaggerated accusations, describing the movement as ‘hysteria, moral panic, hatred of sex, hatred of men’ overtly frames #MeToo as a form of female hysteria. By presenting women as ‘puritan, Victorian, fragile, religious, childish, helpless, hysterical [...] naïve’ in their support for #MeToo, the press shapes the narrative of a progressive movement through an obsolete imaginary. The dystopic parallels deny the place of #MeToo in a legitimate feminist narrative by considering it ‘feminism hijacked by melodrama’. This frames the movement not as real feminism, but as ‘a campaign of public denunciation and summary justice’ and sees victims’ stories as emotional tools undermining the real potential of the movement.

The stark contrast between what the hashtag actually is in its neutral form and the ideology created around it illustrates the connection between form and meaning. The hashtag essentially is transformed into what Barthes (2009: 135) calls “ideas-in-form”, an enabler of mythology, and hence of the #MeToo imaginary. The mythical dimension is not only formed through descriptors, but also by personifying the hashtag as a subject of action. Working as a metonymy, the hashtag comes to stand for all women behind the movement, encompassing their stories and actions. Personified as having agency, the hashtag “takes something that women had long kept quiet about and transforms it into a movement” (Gilbert, 2017). In the process, the focus is redirected from women, with the aim to increase the visibility of the hashtag and its primary role in the movement. However, this undermines the various actors involved (activists, supporters, victims, critics), as everything falls under one trending hashtag. Using #MeToo alongside verbs generally evocative of a human agent such as ‘the movement chains women to the status of the eternal victim’ or ‘a ‘totalitarian’ climate that unfairly punishes men [...], infantilizes women’ emphasizes the uncommon power of the movement, but also its shortcomings as a blanket term. Hempel highlights that such phrases further criticise #MeToo as a dominant rather than enabling power, blocking people in cathartic “states of outrage while exhausting” and keeping them from acting meaningfully (Hempel, 2017).

To an extent, #MeToo can be seen as guiding human behaviour. It has become so emblematic of sexual harassment and women’s struggle that media can rely on contextual understanding without mentioning its name. It is implied in phrases such as ‘the force that is ending his political career’ or ‘turning a bona fide moment of moral accountability into a series of [...] accusations’. This leads to the myth being constructed by using the hashtag as a cohesive discursive element, a symbol for feminism, whose sole mention in conversations can largely evoke the movement and allocate a new dimension to the phrase ‘me too’ than it had in the past. According to Barthes (2009: 141), “since myth is a type of speech, everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse.” In this case, the movement’s mythical dimension is further defined by the narrative tropes surrounding the symbolic place held by the #MeToo hashtag.

### #MeToo: Turning Reality into Myth

Throughout the movement, the concept of power has been central to the discourse on sexual harassment and the relationships between men and women. Power and language or discourse have been historically presented as intertwined by theorists such as Barthes and Foucault. In #MeToo, power has mostly been framed as a social construct representative of the socio-economic status of men in higher-up positions compared to women, their decision to abuse it and the power difference between victims. Sexually harassed women have been a marginalized minority until celebrities used their platform to amplify the subject. Therefore, the balance of power relates to notions of empowerment and disempowerment, social status and knowledge of victims’ experiences. According to Garber (2017a), the #MeToo discourse presented “a recognition of structures, of hierarchies, of power dynamics: the logic of systems, applied to the intimacies of harassment and abuse.” Thus, power has functioned on a spectrum: as it shifted from men who abused and were kept accountable to women who were abused and spoke up. The increasing power in women’s hands went from being framed initially as a utopic quest to being turned into a dystopic generalisation in the backlash period.

Given the abuse encountered by women, power has been initially presented as a masculine privilege. Visual titles such as “Harvey Weinstein ripped a generation of actresses from society” (Milano, 2018) popularized an unequal power distribution between a strong individual and a weak collective. However, the hashtag shifted this by lending its power and visibility to women, facilitating “a feed dominated by women discussing their experiences of harassment and assault” (Gilbert, 2017). By giving women a space to safely challenge abuse, the hashtag moved power from an established sphere of money and authority to a rising platform of truth and agency. Unlike masculine power which has historically gone unchallenged, a recent display of female power like #MeToo invited ‘a crackdown’. Depending on journalistic perspectives, the coverage of the newly gained power of women has been utopic as ‘women speaking truth to power [...] encourages other women to stand up’ or dystopic as they ‘take revenge against individual men while doing nothing to topple the patriarchy’. This has led to a conundrum for women, wherein despite being praised for speaking up, they are criticised and cast out if overstressing these issues.

B.	UTOPIC	NEUTRAL	DYSTOPIC
W O M E N  D E S C R I P T I O N	An army of voices; Silence breakers; Whistle blower; Amplifying advocates; A sisterhood of women sticking together; Whisper networks; Designated guardians, entrusted with policing men's bad behaviors; Feminist heroines	Accusers are celebrities, with status, fame, and success commensurate with his own [Weinstein's]; Influencers; Messenger; Victims; Feminists	Sexually infantilized victims; A Twitter mob of thousands; Victimhood status; Hit squad of privileged young white women to open fire; The feminazi #MeToo hive-vagina takes over, the hysteria mill rattles into overdrive, and boom; Poor little things who are dominated by demon phallicrats; Feminist camp; Puritan, Victorian, fragile, religious, childish, helpless, hysterical [...] naïve [...] bloody-minded; Snowflakes; Targets; Castrating villainesses; Leaders of a ravening mob; An overzealous mob
M E N	One bad guy; Idols; Calling the poor guy a monster and a rapist; Another fallen soldier in the sex wars; Innocent men are being mowed down	Harasser; Perpetrator; Rapist	Monster; Sexual predator; Dream crushers
A C T I O N	Survivors don't owe you their story; Women speaking truth to power [...], then it encourages other women to stand up; Women should no longer have to bear the brunt of the burden and shame that comes with sexual assault; Everyone wants to smoke out the serial predators and rapists Life for women is presented as a battleground where we are all only one bad joke, one wolf whistle or one stare away from being assaulted; Women who blew the whistle on a culture of harassment; [Women] are radically redefining consent; By coming together and speaking in one voice, women can tip the balance	Men have admitted inappropriate behaviour; Women are exposing the truth and men are losing their jobs; When men hold most of the power it's all too easy for them to abuse it; [Women] are demanding to be heard, and even more fundamentally to be prioritized	[Women] policing sexuality; [Women] get dinged for complicity if they don't police it vigilantly enough, and risk being cast as castrating villainesses if they issue sentence; How violently present the victim is forced to be in the narrative, and how utterly passive the perpetrator; The countless anonymous strangers who have forced their way forever into their targets' memories; How One Harasser Can Rob a Generation of Women; Their collective anger has spurred immediate and shocking results; Women are angry, temporarily powerful—and very, very dangerous Some women using the moment to take revenge against individual men while doing nothing to topple the patriarchy; [Women] conflating major crimes with minor ones; Women torching men for failing to understand their 'nonverbal cues'

**Figure 3.** Language forming the narrative around the movement through descriptions of accusers and abusers and their action

It is such subjectivity that has driven the #MeToo narrative into the mythical realm through evocative parallels as seen in **Figure 3**.

Dyer (1977) argues that we make sense of the world through classification systems and wider categories, such as the narrative tropes used here through action-language. The phrases 'a hegemony as deeply rooted as the patriarchy' or 'our terror of female power' capture the political context of the movement in which women are seen as challengers of established societal norms. Terms like 'tip the balance', 'targets' or 'conflating major crimes with minor ones' evoke the existence of a sense of justice, an external form of accountability, that would oversee the relations between victims and abusers in order to decide the truth. The terms 'survivors', 'battleground', 'torching men', and 'witch-hunt' are referring to a war-like situation relying on brute force or a medieval judiciary system set outside of an objective truth zone. Could then justice in #MeToo be on the side of those who hold the power? To a degree, as these evocations derive from a power spectrum, but they are also closely connected to public views on sexuality. Criticised for surpassing the movement's positive groundswell by going into policing sexuality, Traister (2017) remarks that women are "entrusted with policing men's bad behaviours, they will get dinged for complicity if they don't police it vigilantly enough, and risk being cast as castrating villainesses if they issue sentence." This paradox frames justice as a subjective practice wherein women are singled out regardless of whether they support a toxic climate of sexuality or militate against sexual abuse. Alongside being referred to as 'castrating villainesses', women are demonized through the trope of the villain during the backlash period, whilst men are described in a much simpler manner as 'one bad guy'.

Derrida (1981: 41) highlighted that there is a relation of power in binary oppositions where "one of the two terms governs the other", an equally visible example in #MeToo. Initially, men were dystopically described as 'monster', 'sexual predator', and 'dream crushers', whilst women were utopic 'survivors', 'whistle blowers', or 'feminist heroines'. During the backlash, the situation reversed to men being described as 'one bad guy', while women were dystopic 'leaders of a ravening mob'. As the movement evolved, superiority or inferiority descriptors shaped the parallels victim-abuser and accuser-accused into utopic or dystopic metaphors. As a result, a stereotypical game emerged that designed to exclude and condemn (Dyer, 1977) temporarily benefiting one side of the narrative until it gets reversed through a backlash. However, the lexical field of masculine denominations, despite its utopic-dystopian connotations, remained embedded in the pragmatism of men's actions with limited allusions to an imaginary narrative as done for women. Nolan (2017) remarks "how violently present the victim is forced to be in the narrative, and how utterly passive the perpetrator", a similarly problematic inequality with

vocabulary. Imitating the language preponderantly used by #MeToo critics in the backlash, journalist Laurie Penny (2018) talks about “another fallen soldier in the sex wars” and “the feminazi #MeToo hive-vagina” to prove the point that while men are described through a warfare lexicon, women’s ideals are framed as an ideology. The abuser is presented losing the ‘sex wars’, a concept evocative of feminist debates used to designate the ongoing tensions between men and women’s approaches to sexuality. Women accusers are called ‘feminazi’, applying the pure race ideology to the feminine gender and hyperbolizing the oppression of men at the hands of women. The ‘hive-vagina’ term discredits the collectivity of the movement by reducing it to a mock group-mind driven by female sexual desires. This image of a normative mentality alienates women from the reality of their experiences and discourages identification.

Yet the mediatic focus on women in the #MeToo narrative, be it supportive or antagonistic, has also shaped a key mythical element: the collective. The phrases ‘a Twitter mob of thousands’, ‘hit squad of privileged young white women’, ‘a sisterhood of women sticking together [...] feminist camp’ are suggesting the collective nature of #MeToo as a sign of the movement’s potency and unity. Similar to the men-women binary opposition, the collective of women is framed as dominating in numbers and visibility compared to the abusers. Despite an existing bias against women coming from a reticence to give full validation to such a sudden portrayal of female power, the media coverage has nevertheless managed to turn the initial minority of sexual harassment victims into a majority, influencing the public perception of the movement.

Broadly, this discourse analysis uncovers the symbolic status of the hashtag, evocative of concepts such as feminism and sexuality and driving a narrative based on socio-cultural notions of power and binary oppositions. On a lexical level, it highlights the way language is used by the media to frame the reality of the movement into a utopic and dystopic imaginary. One article insightfully remarks that “perhaps the most terrifying thing about dystopia is how perilously close it can come to utopia” (Fallon, 2017), highlighting how easily the positive imaginary of a social movement can be transformed into a negative one. Barthes (1983: 113) notes that motivation is necessary to the creation of myth, as “there is no myth without motivated form”. By constantly moving #MeToo into different versions of an imaginary, media keep the event present in the public mind. The perceptions of #MeToo are thus not arbitrary, but rather they are equally shaped by the place of the hashtag in written media that we have discussed and its representations in popular culture that we will further examine.

## THE AFTERLIFE



Clint Smith  @ClintSmithlll · Feb 22

I truly have come to believe that the only way there will be any meaningful movement on gun control is if we start showing photos of what bullets actually do to people's bodies.

People honestly think they look like bodies on Law & Order reruns. The reality is far more jarring.

120 373 1.5K

motheroforder  @mamaorder

Follow

Replies to @ClintSmithlll

That would only further augment the grand media spectacle, sending it spiraling out of control. Look at #MeToo  . People fed on survivors' stories, sensationalized them, fetishized them, turned them into objects again -- only this time as spectacle. Spectacle is not a solution.

11:43 am - 23 Feb 2018



**Figure 4.** Motheroforder (@mamaorder). Reply @ClintSmithlll, 23 February 2018, 11:43 a.m. Tweet

## Hashtagging: from Individual Agency to Social Validation

The media discourse has shaped the #MeToo myth, offering it an aura of fascination as a revolutionary and equally controversial movement. This has prompted people to actively engage in the perpetuation of the myth through the hashtag. As a ‘too-perfect meme’, this cultural token, shared by imitation or by natural flow of associations online, has created a ritual. As with other online movements, participating in the conversation requires that any tweet containing a relevant story, opinion or criticism to be followed by the hashtag. The hashtag’s construction thus emphasizing ‘the personal and the anecdotal’ transforms the ritual into a form of claiming agency on an individual level. For sexual assault victims, the use of #MeToo is a statement of an individual’s capacity to engage with the social structures that have marginalized them with the goal of challenging this position. For the larger public, it allows them to engage in the conversation in order to challenge or support the movement’s agenda and in this way, strengthen or undermine its actions.

Through its ubiquitous ceremonial role in the millions of instances of this ritual, the hashtag got to play a political role as well, due to its success comparable to political movements and advocacy hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter or #WomensMarch. However, whereas these started as politically loaded phrases, #MeToo emerged as a personal action manifested in the public sphere. This reduces the movement to a closed group, a familiar dimension of mutual support between ‘me’ and other women in similar situations, whilst the hashtag’s ceremonial role introduces a third collective actor, the online public, which is allowed not only to observe, but also to intervene in the conversation. Paradoxically, the hashtag enables both an individual ritualistic dimension in #MeToo and a necessary transgression of it that despite breaking the personal space, offers more momentum to the movement.

The virality and political influence of the hashtag in pushing stories that bring abusers under public scrutiny, however, transformed its ceremonial use from a representation of agency into one of validation. Its usage as an informal yet socially demanded form of proof validating victims’ accusations, created a social pressure that reduced women to their stories of abuse as their complaint became their identity. The cultural tension between the agency inspired by the hashtag on an individual level in fighting against sexual assault and its public validation, led to critic Daphne Merkin’s (2018) observation that “publicly, we say #MeToo” whilst “privately, we have misgivings.” She argues that although women are seen supporting the principle of the movement in the public sphere, they actually feel doubtful about its potential to change reality. Therefore, whereas the hashtag initially truly represented a reckoning, its increasing popularity led to it being used as a token for conversation, more or less representative of everyone’s values. Nevertheless, its ceremonial dimension also works like ‘a badge of honour’, allowing women, supporters and critics actively seeking inclusion into the #MeToo universe to be recognised as part of it by contrast to the abusers who are passively included in the conversations. Its symbolic dimension makes people see it as a representation of a shared set of norms and conventions around the movement.

Reflective of individual agency and public validation, the ceremonial dimension of the hashtag concomitantly drives membership to a cultural group. Talking about the role of religion in social cohesion, Durkheim (1982) highlights that mythology is essential to the existence of a cultural group through its reflection of norms and beliefs in which individuals are socialised and which are expressive of the collective consciousness. By perpetuating the mythical dimension of #MeToo, the hashtag introduces the movement in the public imaginary through its narratives. Using the hashtag for expressing opinions, supportive or critical, grants people membership to a larger cultural group which shares an interest in contributing to the #MeToo conversation. The narrative tropes of feminism, women’s rights and sexuality connected to #MeToo have actually extended the movement into “a moment reflecting a collective experience of trauma and injustice” (Haribhakti and Shah, 2017) which facilitates this larger identification with the movement. Without having necessarily experienced sexual assault, the cultural group relates figuratively to the trauma of these experiences, acknowledging it as a social problem which they aim to tackle. In fact, this group serves as a larger space for the existence of the mythicized collective of women victims seeking justice. At the core of the movement, the members of this smaller group not only share an interest in the movement, but also the realities of sexual abuse, using the hashtag to speak up. This allows the creation of an imagined community in which the members “will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, 1991, p.6). In reality, the communion is formed around the fight against sexual assault as a victim of such an event. The hashtag acts as a common space for the countless accounts shared online, unifying them and becoming a totem for the imagined community.

## Representing the Movement: A Collective Spectacle

Three months into #MeToo, TIME Magazine offered their Person of the Year award to the collective of women who were assaulted and spoke up, further stressing the existence of an imagined community as part of the #MeToo myth. The yearly distinction is awarded to the person or group of people who sparked the most important discussions in the world. In a year significantly marked by feminist rhetoric, the women behind #MeToo received

the title of “Silence Breakers”. TIME’s article (Zacharek et al., 2017) accompanying the distinction told a story of solidarity and collective strength for shared experience that led to an important conversation about sexual assault. This image permeated the public imaginary and transformed #MeToo into a movement of togetherness. As an imagined community, the narrative although anchored in the real forces of the thousands of women who spoke up against sexual harassment, also relied on the metaphorical portrayal of #MeToo “as a movement of sound, of voices, of volume” (Garber, 2018b). Terms such as ‘an army of voices’, ‘whisper networks’ or ‘amplifying advocates’ used the realm of vocal resonance to emphasize the impact of women breaking the silence.

Through this recognition, speech in #MeToo has come to reflect an act of power in which women are taking agency over their experiences, changing trauma into justice through discourse. Given the overwhelming number of tweets shared under the same hashtag, the speech that gets heard is actually the one from the people who are most visible on the social platforms, in the media and in the public sphere. This reinforces Foucault’s idea of power linked to discourse as a form of knowledge and the inherent inequality between authoritative and silenced discourses (Pinkus, 1996). Despite some intersectionality on Twitter, #MeToo has been “predominantly white, cisgender and heterosexual in focus, relying on the public performance of trauma as absolution” (Duck-Chong, 2017). Publications mostly spread the image of famous actors, directors or producers as perpetrators and discussed the accounts of famous actresses. The hashtag became powerful through association with celebrities, which helped propel the myth even further. Thus, the beautiful-stars-abused-by-a-producer narrative found in the Weinstein case helped mythicise, albeit in a sensationalist manner at times, the crude reality of an issue faced by women around the world. The visibility of celebrities made the hashtag salient in the public perception and expanded the movement to more low-key sexual harassment stories like the comedian Aziz Ansari’s case. It also helped bring forward less visible people such as activists fighting on behalf of communities experiencing sexual abuse on a regular basis. However, relying on celebrities’ images in order to do this created the image of a ‘show of solidarity’ between the privileged and the less privileged. This captured the public imagination and created a public spectacle meant to support the cause of #MeToo.

At 2018’s edition of The Golden Globes, actresses offered their platform to the promotion of this social cause by wearing black dresses and a “Time’s Up” pin. Representing the launch of a new initiative providing funding and legal assistance to victims of sexual abuse, the event built on the momentum of #MeToo and put it back in the spotlight. Although the event acknowledged the work of activists such as #MeToo originator Tarana Burke, it also transformed the movement into a media spectacle. The actresses wanted the focus to be on their and their activist guests’ political statements, but the public fascination lingered on their presence. If until then the public gaze was laid upon each actress individually, now the public fascination was set around them as a collective. Through considerable mediatic coverage, this form of entertainment worked as a visibility trigger for #MeToo.

Alongside Tarana Burke’s speech at the opening of New Year’s Eve ball drop in Times Square or former actress and activist Rose McGowan’s unconventional media interviews, the myth of #MeToo was further perpetuated, turning by association the hashtag into an object of desire and attention. Thus, the hashtag becomes an object for display and assertion as part of the visible dimension presented by celebrities. As a cultural object, it captures Baudrillard’s (2006, p.58) theory of new technologies that work “as erratic novelties, drawing their fascination from their complicity with myth, with the future, with the imaginary, and not at all from their possibility of changing the present.” With some people using it as a way to be part of the public discussion in order to gain individual visibility, the hashtag enters the sphere of consumption as a myth, an object, a story that seems cut from the reality of women’s everyday issues with sexual harassment and abuse.

Debord (1992) presents the thin line between spectacle and reality in his work by highlighting that if reality is continuously turned into a spectacle, then the spectacle itself becomes reality. In the case of #MeToo, this happens through the change in status of the hashtag from a tool into a symbol. The moment the hashtag is linked not only to the myth perpetuated by media coverage, but also to the celebrity realm which prompts public fascination, it ceases to function solely in the real sphere and starts occupying the imaginary one. The recurrent display of the movement as a mediatised spectacle or public manifestation brings it gradually into the mainstream. The hashtag’s initial role of challenging common beliefs about sexual assault becomes normalised and the spectacle is seen as part of reality, escaping public fascination through lack of novelty. Thus, treating the hashtag as an object of consumption of imaginary narratives has contrasting effects. On one hand, it subverts its status as a sign. This compromises its understanding as a symbol of protest, by fetishizing it, turning it into an object to be displayed, rather than to be acted upon. On the other hand, by displacing attention from the overwhelming details and complex emotions surrounding the everyday unfair treatment of women to the myth of women’s assertion of their rights, it subverts the taboo status of sexual assault and establishes #MeToo in the collective consciousness.

### **Mechanics of a Hashtag: Archiving the Imaginary**

Journalist Megan Garber (2018b) discusses, in an article covering the backlash of #MeToo, the political power of narrative order. She emphasizes that the framing of events influences significantly public perception and

selective vision grants certain actors and instances a greater visibility than others. Thus, the way the #MeToo story is told and the presented order of events have an effect on the perception and perpetuation of a certain narrative over another. The hashtag is a space of selective vision, a collage of various perspectives assembled based on a mix of personal recommendations and trending topics defined by Twitter's algorithm (2019). Therefore, no one receives the same body of tweets, in the same order or framed similarly when retrieving them through the #MeToo hashtag. The myth can be readily changed if, for example, dystopic perspectives appear more often than utopic ones or precede neutral accounts, creating a skewed image of the movement. This is particularly important since the hashtag acts as a mnemonic device in the recalling of the #MeToo myth. The moment you say #MeToo you automatically bring into discussion concepts of sexuality, abuse, power, celebrity and women's rights in the workplace and over their bodies. If initially the utopic and dystopic connotations have been trans-coded into the hashtag, assigning it new layers of meaning and transforming it into the symbol of a myth, now the hashtag is the one trans-coded into culture in order to embed the #MeToo myth into the public sphere. Even though it aims to offer a preponderantly definitive account of what has been discussed on that topic on the social platform by continuously and immediately updating its meaning, accessing the whole archive in order to have an overview of all discussions is out of reach for most individuals. Therefore, the perpetuation of the myth in the public imaginary is easily influenced by any inclusions or omissions through the hashtag.

Essentially, the hashtag's archival function has a direct impact on its output in culture. Nora's (1989, p.13) exploration of the archival nature of modern memory can be applied to the hashtag as well, as a modern archive of new media. Its role in culture can then be understood through the "materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image" which it carries. The hashtag, through its archival nature, is present and visible as it incorporates the whole of #MeToo. As a cultural object, embedded through its association with the spectacle and myth of the movement, it is used as a reference in culture in order to lend its gained popularity to other cultural objects. Brands have tried to capitalize on the momentum of #MeToo by using the hashtag and its evocation of the movement in their advertising. For example, Hard Candy Cosmetics has unsuccessfully tried to trademark the "#MeToo" symbol for its makeup line, whilst property website Zoopla has been accused of trivialising the movement in an advert. The appropriation of the phrase for driving conversation around brands shows the cultural importance of #MeToo. However, this poses a problem for the place of #MeToo in culture. Given that whatever is shared through the hashtag is conserved as an archive, any irrelevant associations alter the representation of the movement.

The hashtag thus works as a palimpsest, in that it has been altered since its initial use but among the countless new layers of meaning it has gained, it still bears visible traces of its earlier form. Huyssen's (2003) use of the term in analysing a city is applicable to the cultural impact of the hashtag. Comparable to a wax tablet in which writing is both an act of production and elimination, the hashtag imitates the mechanics of a palimpsest by offering different and overlapping discursive registers, identified in the media discourse. It reunites religious, ideological, natural connotations, concepts about feminism and women, about masculinity and sexuality, about individual trauma and collective reckoning all under the same short phrase. However, for the myth to live in culture as an object of fascination, priority is given to recurrent concepts already in the public sphere such as feminism and sexuality and to sensationalist connotations and cultural icons which complement the mythical dimension of the movement by bringing another layer of symbolism to it. Norman Klein (1997, p.13) remarks when discussing the existence of an *imago*, "in order to remember, something must be forgotten." Despite the simplified version of the #MeToo myth perpetuated in culture, the hashtag remains nevertheless an overwhelming repository of emotions, stories and recollections. Through its symbolic role and archiving potential, it is both the place in which the myth is stored and a site of representation. The tremendously high number of tweets and articles shared under the mere #MeToo hashtag illustrate so many perspectives that they paradoxically inflate the hashtag with meaning whilst making it meaningless. The salient concepts remain in the collective imaginary, whilst the details around them get lost under hollow iterations of the hashtag. As a representation of the movement, the hashtag resembles an *imago*, Klein's idealized representation void of meaning. In the case of #MeToo, the hashtag endures as the emblem of a revolutionary fight against sexual abuse. It individualises what captures the public fascination and blurs everything else. It is an overly constructed image that remains a shadow, a myth full of meaning enduring as an ideal.

Barthes (2009: 171) notes in his theory that there are two types of myths: "strong myths and weak myths; in the former, the political quantum is immediate, the depoliticization is abrupt; in the latter, the political quality of the object has faded like a colour, but the slightest thing can bring back its strength brutally." As an ongoing movement, the #MeToo myth is indecisively lying in the middle. Nevertheless, the hashtag acts as an essential part of both the movement's cultural and political quantum, using its symbolic status to establish its political agenda in culture. Through its ceremonial dimension, the hashtag makes the shift from personal to public sphere, transforming individual agency into the collective representation of the social cause. The emerging imagined community of women survivors furthers the mythicization of #MeToo and grants it increased visibility. Linked to

positions of privilege and mediated spectacles, the hashtag becomes a cultural object for consumption whose mnemonic function establishes its cause in the public imaginary. This allows the hashtag to endure in culture as an idealized image of the movement. Despite taking on countless connotations, it is important to note that the hashtag manages to keep clear and unchanged its initial goal of fighting against sexual assault.

## CONCLUSION

At the end of 2017, following the movement's stirring recognition of its transformational potential and foreseeing its looming backlash of generalised accusations, journalist Jessica Bennett (2017b) wrote that "taken together, complicity, feminism and the technological boost of a hashtag seem to have made for a perfect storm and a cultural awakening at once." The cultural awakening is created here not only through the often praised virality of social issues on digital platforms, but more importantly through the hashtag's capability of collating various forms of imaginary constructions into a collective narrative that it further represents in front of the public. Its symbolic status allows the perpetuation of the myth surrounding the movement as a form of cultural object, to be desired, supported, criticised, debated, and consumed by everyone. While transforming a social movement into a spectacle poses threats of trivialisation and passivity, the public fascination with iconic representations and desire to perpetuate mythologized stories keeps it alive. The hashtag captures public attention, establishes the movement in people's minds and maintains the social issue relevant in culture.

The discourse analysis of #MeToo media coverage used here emphasizes the symbolic role of the hashtag in creating a myth around the movement and establishing it in the public imaginary. Journalist Sarah Solemani (2018) highlighted that "dreaming, imagining, longing are not just pastimes of the aimless poet but the secret weapon of every purposeful social reformer." It seems that the reading of the hashtag as a cultural object, reflective of a certain period in time and its socio-economic and cultural struggles, has been mostly deemed unimportant in the greater narrative of real-life change in society. However, this depends on how change is defined, and this article is based on the belief that real-life change can in equal measure stem from the shift in public perception and people's mentality on a certain topic driven by the stories, narrative tropes and social imaginary of hashtag activism. Given the ongoing nature of the movement at the time of writing, future research would benefit from exploring the cultural dimensions of the hashtag by analysing its recollection in the collective memory and potential for changing mentalities. Finally, this could potentially uncover the hashtag's role in permeating cultural memory as a cultural object recalling decisive events and establish it as the driver of collective memory around social issues in the long-term.

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