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# Shifting discourses on sexual violence: an analysis of #MeToo on Twitter

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## Introduction

The aim of this study is to explore the #MeToo movement as a lens to shed a light on some of the wider transformations concerning feminist and communicative practices. #MeToo is a social media campaign that began in October 2017 to combat sexual violence; it has been described as “a watershed moment in sexual violence activism” (Fileborn and Phillips 2019:99). Like other forms of digital feminist activism before it, #MeToo has been interpreted as the latest instance of the classical feminist practice of making the personal political (Clark-Parsons 2019; Loney-Howes 2020).

The starting point for this study is the idea that the public-private dichotomy is discursively constructed by the actors who participate in the public sphere (Habermas 1962; Fraser 1990). Because, in Western liberal democracies, women have historically been excluded from participation in the public sphere, the public-private dichotomy is a deeply *gendered* one, as men have had significantly more power to draw the line between what counts as public and what counts as private, and thus what constitutes the object of public concern. Obvious examples are the issues of sexual harassment or domestic violence, which were long relegated to the private sphere of domestic life; they were cast as “private-domestic or personal-familial matters in contra-distinction to public, political matters” (Fraser 1990:73; see also Pateman 1988). In the 1970s, second-wave feminist activists began challenging the public-private dichotomy to re-frame sexual violence as a social problem and thus the object of common concern. The notion that “the personal is political” was used to illustrate “the ways in which personal experiences of violence, inequality and subordination were not just individual but part of a broader sociopolitical fabric in which violence against women is condoned” (Loney-Howes 2020:3). In this way, the issue of violence was successfully moved from the private to the public sphere. This reveals how the public-private dichotomy is not immutable; rather, it is the subject of constant negotiation among social groups who have a stake in bringing certain issues into the public sphere. The line between public and private, then, is discursively constituted and can be challenged by groups that operate outside the dominant notions of the public sphere.

The deeply interlinked relationship between feminist activism and the public-private sphere has gained new relevance since the 2010s. The past decade has seen feminism become incredibly “*popular*” in the cultural landscape, especially in the sense of being highly *visible* in media contexts in the Western world (Banet-Weiser 2018). Digital media have played a key role in furthering the current “feminist zeitgeist” (Gill 2016), as feminists have made active use of participatory media as tools to “dialogue, network, and organize to challenge contemporary sexism, misogyny, and rape culture” (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller 2019:2). On social media, countless online mobilizations have emerged to combat gender violence and gender inequality; in particular, the use of the hashtag feature provided by social media platforms has become extremely widespread. Hashtags such as #YesAllWomen, #SafetyTipsForLadies, #WhyIStayed, #BeenRapedNeverReported, and, most notably, #MeToo have been used by millions of individuals to collect and disseminate stories on topics such as domestic violence, street harassment, and sexual violence and rape culture in general. This practice has been understood as a new form of the feminist challenge of the traditional division between public and private, since it entails the public discussion of issues that are often cast aside as private (Clark 2016; Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer 2017; Clark-Parsons 2019). This effort is now facilitated by digital media's intrinsic potential to blur the public-private divide, offering easier access to individuals who wish to participate in discussion in the “public space” of digital platforms (Papacharissi 2002). However, while digital spaces are public in the sense that they are (nearly) accessible to all, social media platforms are owned by private corporations, and digital feminism is therefore complicit to the logics of “platform capitalism” (Srnicek 2017). In this sense, then, digital feminism can also be understood in continuity with the rise of “neoliberal feminism”<sup>1</sup> (Rottenberg 2013; see

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<sup>1</sup> Neoliberal feminism is thus defined by Rottenberg (2013): “The contemporary convergence between neoliberalism and feminism involves the production of a new kind of feminism that is eviscerating classic, mainstream liberal feminism. [...] Using key liberal terms, such as equality, opportunity, and free choice, while displacing and replacing their content, this recuperated feminism forges a feminist subject who is not only individualized but entrepreneurial in the sense that she is oriented towards optimizing her resources through incessant calculation, personal initiative and innovation. [...] Inequality between men and women is thus paradoxically acknowledged only to be disavowed, and the question of social justice is recast in personal, individualized terms” (p. 419).

also McRobbie 2020), as it aims to enhance its visibility on media platforms without interrogating their underlying capitalist platforms. Similarly, because the media visibility of feminism is often connected to the rise in high profile celebrities – mostly women – who publicly identify as feminists, the term “celebrity feminism” has also been coined and contextualised within neoliberal feminism (Keller & Ringrose 2015). Whilst this has been criticised for being a “watered-down, commercialised form” of feminism, at the same time it has been noted that “it is important not to simply reinscribe familiar critiques that presume this relationship to be inherently negative for feminist politics, and to recognise that there is no ‘authentic’ feminism that exists beyond its celebrity manifestations” (Hamad & Taylor 2015:125).

The complexities of the entanglement of feminism and digital media became apparent in 2017, when the #MeToo hashtag started trending online, following a story in the New York Times uncovering sexual assault allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein (Kantor & Twohey 2017). With millions of people participating in the online conversation, #MeToo emerged as the most forceful instance of hashtag feminism: “in contrast to other social media feminisms, #MeToo has managed to do what few others have: namely, galvanise, if not mobilise millions of people around the world” (Rottenberg 2019:40). Given its exceptional magnitude and impact, many scholars have since dedicated entire studies to the movement. The most notable analyses have focused on the relationship between #MeToo and the wider media context (Boyle 2019), its implications for social change (Fileborn & Loney-Howes 2019), transnational comparisons of local hashtags (Zacchia, Corsi & Botti 2019), activists’ online practices (Clark-Parsons 2019), and news media coverage (De Benedictis et al. 2019). The present study, then, is positioned within this growing body of research. Its central idea that #MeToo has represented an intervention in mainstream discourse aimed at shifting the public-private boundaries to include a more feminist understanding of issues that are commonly deemed as private. In order to explore this argument, the research focuses on the social media conversation that occurred in the first six months of the movement (October 2017 – April 2018), choosing Twitter as the most public and political online space. The dataset for the study, containing over two million tweets, was generously provided by the “Minerva”

project, co-financed by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies and the *Economia Civile* association (cf. Zacchia, Corsi & Botti 2019). Bruns (2018) recommends that, in order to fully capture the significance of such large datasets, they should first be analysed quantitatively, with the aim of “pinpoint[ing] specific subsets of the data that are then subjected to further qualitative analysis in the form of a close reading of tweets” (p. 9). Following this suggestion, this study adopts an integrated approach that combines quantitative and qualitative analysis, employed sequentially. The research design is articulated into two main stages.

The first stage of the research consists of the quantitative approach, which aims to give an overview of the main trends and themes in the dataset, and to identify some key concepts to guide the analysis in the second stage of the research. On the basis of the results from this stage, two case studies within the wider #MeToo movement are selected for qualitative analysis, which constitutes the second stage of the research. The two selected cases are the publication of a story on the website Babe.net, detailing allegations of sexual misconduct against actor Aziz Ansari (Way 2018), and the publication of an “anti-#Metoo” open letter signed by over 100 prominent French women and published by Le Monde (Chiche et al. 2018). The Twitter discussion over both these controversial cases was analysed using thematic analysis, with the aim of identifying “the most salient constellations of meanings present in the dataset” (Joffe 2012:209).

The integration of the two approaches produces results that point to a conceptualisation of #MeToo as a “culture war” (Hunter 1992), a site of struggle over the meanings and boundaries of contemporary feminism, especially with regard to sexual violence. In particular, it is arguable that #MeToo has managed to produce a discursive shift in the cultural landscape, by making unique use of a combination of social media engagement, amplification on news media, and a widening of the themes that are discussed in the public sphere. As Rottenberg (2019) notes, “this shift has not occurred without a simultaneous backlash, nor has it played out in any linear progressive way” (p. 47). While findings contribute to an understanding of #MeToo as a feminist intervention in the main public sphere, it is also a movement that takes place within an “economy of visibility” (Banet-Weiser 2015, 2018) and that is subject to

“social media logic” (van Dijck & Poell 2013). This translates to an attempt by media platforms to capitalise on survivors’ stories for commercial purposes and to an unequal distribution of visibility that favours the voices of white, privileged women. A theme of backlash also emerges consistently, as the social changes brought forward by #MeToo are met with resistance by those who hold more conservative views of gender and sexuality. In this sense, #MeToo can be interpreted as the expression of a wider struggle between “popular feminism” and “popular misogyny” (Banet-Weiser 2018) that is key to understanding the gender politics of our time.

This study is structured as follow. The first chapter provides an overview of classical public sphere theory, with a particular focus on critiques from feminist scholars. It then introduces the concept of “discursive activism” (S. Young 1997) as a form of feminist participation in the public sphere, and examines its relevance for anti-sexual violence activism. The second chapter moves these concepts into the current era to analyse how they were transformed by digital technologies. It discusses the debate over the conceptualisation of digital spaces as a public sphere, with particular reference to online activism. It then narrows down one specific form of online activism: hashtag feminism, and frames it as a type of discursive activism. The third chapter illustrates the research project. It first introduces the #MeToo movement as the object of the research, explaining its emergence and its significance. It then presents the research design and the methodological choices that it involved. The fourth chapter provides the results from the quantitative analysis of the data and offers an initial discussion of the main findings. The fifth and sixth chapters illustrate the results from the two qualitative case studies selected: the accusations against Ansari and the “anti-#MeToo” letter published in *Le Monde*. The seventh chapter offers a wider discussion of the main themes that emerge from the whole study. The final chapter assesses the discursive shift brought about by #MeToo and makes some considerations for future research.

## *Notes on language*

Talking about sexual violence is a complex matter, as evidenced by the long-running debate about the choices of terms and language to make when discussing the issue (e.g. Young & Maguire 2003; Harris 2011; Hockett & Saucier 2015). Throughout this work, sexual violence is mostly discussed in terms of male perpetrators and female victims. This is not to say that all perpetrators are men and all victims are women; indeed, even though most of the survivors that spoke out during #MeToo are women, the movement has also brought to light incidents that show a more complicated picture of the gender politics of sexual violence<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, the framing of gender as a simple male-female binary is also at risk of being heteronormative and steeped in an anachronistic, patriarchal gender order (Dolan 2014). At the same time, using neutral language can obscure the very real gendered dynamics at play in cases of sexual violence, obfuscating the social contexts and constructions that are conducive to violence (Boyle 2018). Using gendered language is not therefore intended to essentialise the status of women as victims and men as perpetrators, but, on the contrary, it aims to make the constructed nature of gender visible, “hence creating spaces where men’s rejection of violent norms is not only possible but desirable” (Boyle 2018:30). This is especially relevant for the focus of this study, which looks at the intersections between gender and the public-private divide. Because of the centrality of “the gendered character of these categories” and of “the way their constitution reflects the asymmetry or hierarchy of power along gender lines” (Fraser 1992:601), the male-female dichotomy is maintained to reflect gendered power inequalities.

The term “sexual violence” is used in the broadest sense to encompass “all sexual acts or acts directed against women and men's sexuality” which “occur in circumstances where consent is not given or not given freely” (Dartnall & Jewkes 2013:4). Similarly, the term “sexual harassment” is also used broadly to refer to conduct that is sexual, unwelcome, and denies or limits sexual and bodily autonomy, including verbal or

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Andò (2018) looks at the public role of actress Asia Argento as both a female survivor and female perpetrator of sexual violence. Curry (2019) analyses the intertwining of race and gender in the public understanding of actor Terry Crews, a Black male survivor of sexual assault.

non-physical acts (Fileborn 2013; Gartner & Sterzing 2016). While this term is most commonly (as well as in legal definitions) used to refer to workplace sexual harassment, and this is the sense that was most often associated with #MeToo, the definition used here is broader and includes also sexually harassing behaviour that occurs in public spaces (e.g. street harassment) or other settings (e.g. online harassment). The term “sexual assault” is used more specifically to refer to “sexual contact or behavior that occurs without explicit consent of the victim” (RAINN 2021:n.p.).

Finally, talking about individuals who have experienced sexual violence is extremely sensitive, and the different meanings and implications of labels such as “victim”, “survivor” or “victim-survivors” are also frequently discussed by feminist scholars (e.g. Spry 1995; Kelly, Burton & Regan 1996; Reich 2002). While no single label can fully account for the complexities of the experience of sexual violence, the term “survivor” is here preferred, unless the discussion has a particular focus on dynamics of victimhood and victimisation.

## Chapter 1

### Feminism and the public sphere

This chapter offers an overview of classical public sphere theory, with a particular focus on critiques from feminist scholars, including the seminal concept of “subaltern counterpublics” coined by Nancy Fraser (1990). It then introduces the concept of “discursive activism” (S. Young 1997) as a form of feminist participation in the public sphere, and discusses it in relation to anti-sexual violence activism and to the mediatization of feminism.

#### 1. Public sphere theory

In liberal democracies, the division between private and public sphere has historically coincided with unequal relations between women and men. For women, being kept out of the decision-making sphere of political discussion meant continued subordination, since they were hindered in their capacity to bring their own needs and interests forward in order to initiate social change. The different characterization of female and male subjectivity in classical Western political thought has meant that women and men were ascribed to different social spheres, resulting in different roles in history and in the political arena (Pateman 1988; Landes 1998). Whilst men have been the protagonists of the process of civilization, able to transcend nature through the construction of culture and society, women have been relegated to the a-historical realm of domesticity. As Seyla Benhabib (1986) observes,

It is the very constitution of a sphere of discourse which bands the female from history to the realm of nature, from the light of the public to the interior of the household, from the civilizing effect of culture to the repetitious burden of nurture and reproduction. The public sphere, the sphere of justice, moves in historicity, whereas the private sphere, the sphere of care and intimacy, is unchanging and timeless. (p. 410)

Challenging this division between private and public sphere has been one of the key objectives of feminist movements since the late 1960s in advanced industrial societies, as feminists contended that the subordination of women was deeply intertwined with their relegation to domestic life (Landes 1998). This view was famously condensed in the slogan “the personal is political”, which served to highlight how women’s domestic role was politically and socially constructed to perpetuate their subordination in society. Consequently, the slogan has since been used by feminists to emphasise that “private” matters should be brought into the public sphere and become “political” rather than “personal”.

The concept of public sphere, therefore, is extremely relevant to feminist analysis for a number of reasons. First, the subordination of women in Western societies has historically coincided with relegation to the private sphere. Simultaneously, being kept out of the decision-making sphere of political discussion signifies continued subordination, since women were hindered in their capacity to bring their own needs and interests forward in order to initiate social change.

Defining the public sphere is not only an abstract concern, since, as Nancy Fraser (1990) notes, conceptual confusion also has practical political implications, “for example, when agitational campaigns against misogynist cultural representations are confounded with programmes for state censorship, or when struggles to deprivatize housework and childcare are equated with their commodification” (p. 57). Having a clear picture of the spheres of social life is necessary since feminists have long argued that gender equality should be achieved at all levels. For example, as will be further discussed in the next sections, the sphere of culture is central to feminist activism.

Jürgen Habermas's classical definition of the public sphere focuses on its modern form, which emerged in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe: “The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people coming together as a public” (Habermas 1962:27). This new collectivity is composed of people who “put aside social differences and enter into critical discussion and debate using only their reason” (Mah 2000:154). The object of their deliberation “could then be whatever is of 'common concern'” (Habermas 1962:36).

Building critically on Habermas' notion, Fraser (1990) defines the public sphere as “designat[ing] a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction” (p. 57).

Bohman (2004) identifies three necessary features that qualify a public sphere.

The first and most basic requirement is that it “must be a forum, that is, a social space in which speakers may express their views to others and who in turn respond to them and raise their own opinions and concerns” (Bohman 2004:133). This has often been interpreted in a rather literal manner, with ideal examples being town meeting or salons and coffee shops. As will become apparent in the discussion in this and the next chapter, different types of arenas can also be understood as public spheres.

The second condition is that a public sphere should be committed “to freedom and equality in the communicative interaction in the forum”, taking “the specific form of a conversation or dialogue” (Bohman 2004:133). This interaction should therefore be based on speaking in turns and on the expectation that everyone's contribution can influence the interaction freely. This point is also not to be taken literally, as in the interpretation that dialogue should mirror face-to-face interaction, requiring an immediate succession of questions and answers. Rather, it “can be understood in a quite expansive spatial and temporal sense, in that someone in the indefinite future could give a response, without the speaker even conceivably having intended to address that hearer” (Bohman 2004:133-4). This leads to the third requirement: the audience addressed by communication in the public sphere must be indefinite. This implies that the conversation should be open to everyone without exclusion; in this sense it should be “public”.

This description allows for a concept of public sphere that goes beyond Habermas' historically specific form, which, in his view, was no longer feasible after the rise of twentieth century “welfare state mass democracy”. A new conceptualisation of the public sphere can be devised that transcends some of the limits of Habermas's notion and constitutes a useful resource for the present time.

## 2. Participation and exclusion

The first issue addressed by critics is the idea that the bourgeois public sphere was fully open and accessible to all. The work of revisionist historiographers (Landes 1988; Eley 1991) shows that, from the onset, the public sphere was rooted in exclusions along the axes of gender and class status. Historically, the public sphere emerged in parallel with the rise of a male-dominated bourgeoisie as the new ruling class, who defined their new identity in contrast to a feminised private sphere and to the lower social classes to be ruled over. In this sense the establishment of the bourgeois public sphere functioned as a strategy of Bourdieuan distinction (Bourdieu 1979) that constituted a founding element of the culture of the new ruling class. The relevance of embodied speech for the bourgeois public sphere is well described by Michael Warner (1992):

The bourgeois public sphere claimed to have no relation to the body image at all. [...] Yet the bourgeois public continued to rely on features of certain bodies. Access to the public came in the whiteness and maleness that were then denied forms of positivity, since the white male qua public person was only abstract rather than white and male. [...] The rhetorical strategy of personal abstraction is both the utopian moment of the public sphere and a major source of domination. [...] The subject who could master this rhetoric in the bourgeois public sphere was implicitly, even explicitly, white, male, literate, and propertied. (pp. 382–383)

As was discussed in the introduction, then, a gendered division of the realms of public and private is at the core of modern societies and an essential characteristic of the notion of public sphere. Historically, then, the ideal of equal participation was never fully realised, since a number of social categories were formally excluded from official political participation. The denial of civil and political rights on the basis of gender, property and ethnicity meant that women, plebeian men and people of all racialised ethnicities were barred from full participation in public discussion. Even though the classical public sphere prided itself on being accessible to all, the reality of formal exclusion clashed with the ideal of universal openness, and the public sphere remained the domain of a privileged class.

With the expansion of political and civil rights to all sectors of the population, these formal barriers were removed, but this did not mean the end of exclusion. The ideal public sphere envisaged “an arena in which interlocutors would set aside such

characteristics as differences in birth and fortune and speak to one another *as if* they were social and economic peers” (Fraser 1990:63, emphasis added), meaning that social inequalities would be bracketed in the process of interaction. Yet other types of informal impediments remained in place, hindering participation much like formal barriers. The continued subordination of women, of members of ethnic minorities and of lower classes in society has the effect of reducing their access to the public sphere, as social marginalisation translates into political exclusion. Similarly, Fraser notes that “unequally empowered social groups tend to develop unequally valued cultural styles” (1990:64), meaning that more powerful groups make their own communication styles more acceptable and desirable in public discourse, whilst minority styles are more susceptible to being stigmatised and silenced.

The way that social inequalities affect participation in discursive spheres can be better understood by looking at it from an epistemological point of view; specifically, by following the reasoning espoused by Miranda Fricker in *Epistemic Injustice* (2007). Fricker analyses how discursive exchanges are crucially influenced by social power, which is defined as “a practically socially situated capacity to control others’ actions, where this capacity may be exercised (actively or passively) by particular social agents, or alternatively, it may operate purely structurally” (Fricker 2007:13). A particular form of social power is constituted by *identity power*, which is “dependent upon agents having shared conceptions of social identity—conceptions alive in the collective social imagination that govern, for instance, what it is or means to be a woman or a man, or what it is or means to be gay or straight, young or old, and so on” (Fricker 2007:14). Social actors share collective conceptions of social identities – these can be referred to as stereotypes – that influence their actions (often subconsciously). An example of the structural functioning of identity power that Fricker offers, and that is especially relevant to the issue of access to the public sphere, is that of political participation. She presents the case of an informally disenfranchised social group that does not usually vote, because their “collectively imagined social identity is such that they are not the sort of people who go in for political thinking and discussion” (Fricker 2007:16), whilst more politically active groups are equally moved by a “social self-

conception in the collective imagination such that ‘People like us are politically engaged’” (Fricker 2007:16).

This framework is particularly useful for the current discussion since gender constitutes an arena of identity power, so that collective conceptions about men and women and their roles can influence the actions of social agents. Specifically, having looked at how men and women have been historically assigned to different spheres of social life in Western societies – public and private respectively - it follows that even in the absence of formal barriers to political participation, women might feel discouraged about taking part in public life. Like Fricker's example about politically disenfranchised groups, persisting gender stereotypes that see political life as “men's work”, whilst women are more associated with the domestic sphere, have the effect of perpetuating the gender divide in political participation.

There is another negative effect to identity power, specifically when stereotypes turn into prejudice against a certain social group – what Fricker names *identity prejudice*. Because individuals rely on social stereotypes as heuristics when they assess a speaker's credibility, if there exist a negative prejudice against the speaker, the hearer might make “an unduly deflated judgement on their credibility” (Fricker 2007:17), and the speaker is therefore harmed in their capacity as a knower. This is the central concept in Fricker's work: *testimonial injustice*, which is defined as a type of harm that “occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word” (Fricker 2007:1). The examples of testimonial injustice are numerous; for instance, a black man accused of a crime whose testimony is not believed due to racial prejudice, or a woman reporting a rape who is questioned due to gender prejudice. Because these symbolic representations are so entrenched in our culture, they can persist even in the face of material progress, so that even when women are increasingly moving out of the domestic sphere, unconscious bias about gender roles continues to influence others' attitudes towards them. For example, while the number of women in the political arena has been steadily growing in liberal democracies, there continue to be negative stereotypes about female politicians, who are seen as transgressing traditional expectations of gender roles, including the private-public divide (Okimoto & Brescoll 2010; Campus 2013).

What emerges from this discussion is the idea that social inequalities cannot be truly bracketed in the public sphere, since informal impediments continue to influence the discussion and since participation is affected by gender bias and other types of prejudice. Pretending that social inequalities do not exist or do not affect discussion vitiates public interaction, because “such bracketing usually works to the advantage of dominant groups in society and to the disadvantage of subordinates” (Fraser 1990:64). What this implies for feminist activism is that social inequalities, including gender inequality, should be explicitly thematised and placed at the centre of public discussion. One of the ways to achieve this is to bring traditionally “private” forms of inequality, such as unequal gender relations, into the public sphere, as explained in the next section.

### **3. Subaltern counterpublics**

The second point to be addressed is Habermas's claim that the ideal public sphere should only be one (“the” public sphere in the singular) and that the development of other publics historically represented a sign of decline. This perspective is “informed by an underlying evaluative assumption, namely, that the institutional confinement of public life to a single, overarching public sphere is a positive and desirable state of affairs, whereas the proliferation of a multiplicity of publics represents a departure from, rather than an advance towards, democracy” (Fraser 1990:66). However, if, as it has been stated, members of more powerful social groups tend to dominate political discussion, having a single public sphere means further marginalising subordinated groups, who are kept out of the political arena.

This is another point where Habermas's idealisation of the bourgeois public sphere proves to be lacking, since revisionist historiography shows that other publics, such as those comprising of women, ethnic minorities and LGBTQ+ individuals, have always existed besides the dominant one. Fraser condenses this knowledge into the concept of “subaltern counterpublics”: “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 1990:67).

The development of this notion is perhaps Fraser's most fruitful and well-known contribution from *Rethinking the public sphere*. The conceptualisation of subaltern counterpublics is relevant for two reasons. The first is related to the argument made in the previous paragraph about the need to lessen social inequalities in order for public discussion to be truly accessible. When socially subordinated groups have their own space for discussion, it can be turned into a source of empowerment, by strengthening their identities, formalising their needs, and, more generally institutionalising their existence. Fraser particularly highlights the role of separate spheres for developing new language and concepts, quoting terms such as “sexism”, “sexual harassment” and “marital, date, and acquaintance rape” (Fraser 1990:67) that were coined by feminist counter publics to frame issues that were significant to them, and that they were able to recognise thanks to collective discussion, but that the mainstream public did not have a name for.

This point can be better understood by integrating it again with the work of Miranda Fricker. She underlines how it is no coincidence that the mainstream often lacks terms to describe and formalise experiences that are specific to marginalised groups, since one of the advantages of social power is the ability to structure social reality. Because social power is unequally distributed, collective social understandings are also unfairly modeled by those who hold the most power:

relations of unequal power can skew shared hermeneutical resources so that the powerful tend to have appropriate understandings of their experiences ready to draw on as they make sense of their social experiences, whereas the powerless are more likely to find themselves having some social experiences through a glass darkly, with at best ill-fitting meanings to draw on in the effort to render them intelligible. (Fricker 2007:148)

Fricker names this process *hermeneutical marginalization*, meaning that members of disadvantaged groups are subordinated or excluded from the practice of generating collective social meanings. This has the effect of making “the collective hermeneutical resource *structurally prejudiced*, for it will tend to issue interpretations of that group’s social experiences that are biased because insufficiently influenced by the subject group, and therefore unduly influenced by more hermeneutically powerful groups” (Fricker 2007:155). Following this conceptualisation, then, Fricker defines a second

type of epistemic injustice in addition to testimonial injustice, which she names *hermeneutical injustice*: “the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource” (Fricker 2007:155).

One of the examples that Fricker gives, and that is particularly illuminating for the present discussion, is the story of a woman named Wendy Sandford, as recounted in Susan Brownmiller’s memoir (1990). In the late 1960s, Sandford, who at the time was suffering from depression following the birth of her child, and who had never been involved in political activity, was brought by a friend to a meeting of the women’s liberation movement at MIT. When the group addressed the topic of postpartum depression, Sandford had a sudden revelation: “I realized that what I’d been blaming myself for, and what my husband had blamed me for, wasn’t my personal deficiency. It was a combination of physiological things and a real societal thing, isolation” (Brownmiller 1990:182). From this account, it emerges how an individual affliction was actually rooted in a collective hermeneutical gap caused by structural prejudice, namely the gender inequalities that translated into women’s medical conditions being ignored or underestimated: “the unequal relations of power prevented women from participating on equal terms with men in those practices by which collective social meanings are generated” (Fricker 2007:152).

What is noteworthy here, and what resonates with Fraser’s description of the work of subaltern counterpublics, is the fact that hermeneutical injustice is overcome through a collective effort, as the woman was only able to recognise her experience when it was shared in her feminist meeting. Indeed, feminist publics have historically struggled to overcome hermeneutical injustice, as they recognised the impossibility of many women to truly comprehend aspects of their life as they – and the world they belonged to – lacked the hermeneutical resources that could allow them to do so. This is why the feminist practice of consciousness-raising and speak-outs became fundamental:

the sharing of scantily understood, barely articulate experiences was a direct response to the fact that so much of women's experience was obscure, even unspeakable, for the isolated individual, whereas the process of sharing these half-formed understandings awakened hitherto dormant resources for social meaning that brought clarity, cognitive confidence, and increased communicative facility. (Fricker 2007:148)

In this sense, the existence of publics that are alternative to the mainstream and that offer a specific space for marginalised groups represent a source of empowerment for their members, as they can (partly) overcome structural inequalities through the recognition of their needs and interests.

The second important point that Fraser (1990) makes about subaltern counterpublics is that they contribute to a “widening of discursive contestation” (p. 67), meaning that a single public sphere no longer exercises unique power by having monopoly on public discussion, and that all issues are always open to debate, as they are subject to scrutiny from subaltern publics. Having a larger number of competing publics, then, allows for increased participation than a single public sphere, thus contributing to a reduction of participatory inequality. Moreover, as Habermas pointed out, members of a public are aware that they form a “part of a potentially wider public” (Fraser 1990:67), and so they act knowing that they have the possibility to influence a broader arena.

Felski (1989), whom Fraser credits for coining the term “counterpublic”, describes the feminist public sphere as “coalitions of overlapping subcommunities, which share common interest in combating gender oppression but which are differentiated not only by class and race positions but often by institutional locations” (p. 171). This definition allows for greater attention to two important points. The first is the issue of class and race differences within the same movement, which can cause certain individuals or sub-groups to receive more attention or be better received by mainstream audiences because of their privilege. The second point she highlights is the variety of spaces that the feminist public sphere can occupy, both internally – such as creating their own media, political groups, businesses – and externally, by taking positions of power in mainstream institutions.

These two points, then, can be summed up as the “dual character” of subaltern counterpublics:

On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides. This dialectic enables subaltern counterpublics partially to offset, although not wholly to eradicate, the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies. (Fraser 1990:68)

The centrality of discursive contestation in public spheres leads to the third and final issue to be considered here: the construction of public-private boundaries in the public sphere. Habermas conceived of the public sphere as a space for private persons to deliberate about public matters, thus raising the question of what counts as a public issue, and what in contrast counts as private. When brought into public sphere theory, these concepts become relevant as there must be a definition of what is public and what is private in order to establish what can be the object of deliberation. Fraser points out that such a distinction can only be made by participants of the public sphere themselves, since they are the ones affected, and since the boundaries of public-private are not given a priori, but must be decided through discursive contestation.

Again, the example given here is that of domestic violence, which was long thought to be a private matter confined within the family walls. It was only through the work of feminist subaltern counterpublics that this conception of domestic violence as a private issue was contested. Once feminists uncovered it as “a widespread systemic feature of male-dominated societies” (Fraser 1990:71), it could be framed as a social problem and thus the object of common concern. In this way, the issue was successfully moved from the private to the public sphere.

The main point that emerges here is the idea that what counts as a public matter is discursively constructed. In particular, a marginalised group can be successful in turning what was previously long thought of as a private matter into a public one.

It must be noted that the concept of counter public has also received its share of criticism for being based on an oppositional dichotomy between dominant and subaltern publics and for focusing excessively on the identity of its members. The concept may result in a reification of public sphere dynamics that prevents an analysis

of the true complexity of publics; such as individuals who share membership to more than one public, or intra- and inter-public relations. As Squires (2002) points out,

[d]ifferentiating the 'dominant' public sphere from 'counterpublics' solely on the basis of group identity tends to obscure other important issues, such as how constituents of these publics interact and intersect, or how politically successful certain publics are in relation to others (p. 447)

Moreover, Asen (2000) notes that these “collectives are not necessarily composed of persons excluded from wider public spheres” (p. 429), thus emphasising individual agency in choosing to take part in certain movements following one's convictions rather than as a result of exclusion.

In this respect, Iris M. Young (1997) stresses the importance of conceiving social groups not on the basis of an essentialised view of identity, but rather on the hierarchical social structures that shape their position in society:

In a relational conception, what constitutes the group is the relation in which it stands to others [...] Class, gender, and race are some of the most far reaching and enduring structural relations of hierarchy and inequality in modern societies. (I. M. Young 1997:389–390).

In this view, identities are not fixed, but the product of a wider network of social relations. Consequently, publics are also not fixed, but their composition can shift over time as a result of transformations in social structures and of the behaviour of their members. This is evident, for example, in Squires' (2002) study of the African American public sphere, which went from a secret, “enclave” publics due to repression in time of slavery, to a counterpublic more similar to Fraser's model during the civil rights movement in the mid-twentieth century.

#### **4. Discursive activism, speaking out and visibility**

Because, as outlined so far, women were traditionally excluded from the mainstream political sphere, they resorted to other forms of political activism that were not recognised as such. It was only at the end of the 1980s that social movement scholars began paying attention to the discursive, cultural and emotional aspects of activism. Analysing the “new” social movements that began in the in 1960s, these scholars

provided a conceptual contribution of the way social movements constitute cultural communities that define themselves against dominant discourses (Melucci 1989, 1996; Taylor 1989). The central characteristic of these “new” social movement is the struggle to “uncover and reconfigure relations of power in terms of access to social and political resources, and control over the appropriation of discourses” (Loney-Howes 2020:5). On a similar note, Warner (2002) contends that people join together in a group because of the strength of the interactions and exchanges that occur within the group, rather than because of the strength of its organisation: it is the discourse “that creates the public; it is not the rules or the organization of people creating the public” (Hayes 2017:124).

While all social movements make use of symbolic and discursive practices, it is the feminist movement that “has from the outset identified such interventions, and the territory they contest, as central to maintaining or transforming women's social, political, and economic positions” (S. Young 1997:12). The reason for this centrality of discourse to feminist activism is double-fold. On the one hand, the historical exclusion of women from official public spheres led them to develop alternative spaces for political activity. On the other hand, feminists were also aware of the key role played by culture in securing the subordination of women, which led them to pay close attention to issues such as media representation, the propagation of feminist discourses through publications, and the use of consciousness-raising groups (Taylor & Whittier 1995; S. Young 1997).

The term “discursive activism” has thus been coined in feminist literature to define the “activism directed at promoting new grammars, new social paradigms through which individuals, collectivities, and institutions interpret social circumstances and devise responses to them” (S. Young 1997:3). Through the use of speech and texts, activists “seek to challenge opposing discourses by exposing power relations within these discourses, denaturalising what appears natural and demonstrating the flawed assumptions and situatedness of mainstream social discourse” (Shaw 2012a:42). Clark-Parsons (2019) builds on Judith Butler’s notion of performativity to understand this kind of speech as “stylized repetition of acts,” which “founds and consolidates the

subject” (Butler 1990:140). In this sense, discourse is “productive, creating material effects for the speaker and listener beyond its transmission” (Clark-Parsons 2019:4).

Discursive practices focus “specifically on the power of women telling their stories, and placing their experiences within political contexts, in order to help other women to imagine and act on options they did not previously realize existed” (S. Young 1997:13). In this sense, discursive activism operates as a challenge to the public-private split, since stories that were previously framed as private are brought into the public sphere.

One of the issues that feminists have majorly engaged with through discursive activism is sexual violence. The discursive practices that originated in the 1970s feminist movement have given rise to the “belief that producing and disseminating a genre of personal experiential narratives can end sexual violence” (Serisier 2018:4). As it was previously outlined in the discussion of Fricker's (2007) work on epistemic injustice, during the second-wave feminist movement, the collective sharing of women's individual experiences produced a common understanding of the structural, systematic nature of patriarchal violence. This resulted in a re-framing of sexual violence as a widespread social problem, rather than a personal predicament. This discursive shift therefore entailed the necessity to bring these stories in the public sphere, in order for them to move beyond feminist circles and become the object of public attention. This practice became consolidated over the years to the point of developing a “wide-spread cultural acceptance of the political and ethical necessity of speaking out as a response to rape” (Serisier 2018:4).

According to Serisier (2018:6), this belief in the power of speaking out against sexual violence is based on three main motivations. First, the sharing and making public of experiences of sexual violence can shift the public discourse so that it includes the perspective of actual survivors. Second, by demonstrating the pervasiveness of sexual violence, it aims to combat the stigma collectively faced by survivors. Third, it also contributes to the empowerment of survivors on an individual level, by giving them a voice and publicly acknowledging their own expertise on the issue. Speaking out can also be used by survivors to seek justice outside of the legal system, since formal criminal justice proceedings often have disappointing and re-victimising outcomes,

indicating a “shortfall in the adequacy of institutional responsiveness to sexual violence and gender justice” (Salter 2013:229). As Loney-Howes (2020) summarises,

[J]ustice remains elusive if not impossible for many victim-survivors engaged with formal criminal justice proceedings (Henry et al., 2015). Conviction rates remain low, attrition rates high, and despite decades of law reforms in Western legal jurisdictions seeking to better support victim-survivors, address issues relating to the nature and expression of consent and amendments to the rules of evidence, these changes have been at best uneven and, at worse, have reinforced problematic attitudes about victims and offenders (Corrigan, 2013). Victim-survivors continue to report dissatisfaction with their treatment by the criminal justice system regardless of the outcome of a case; their needs are not adequately accounted for across all levels with the system. (p. 121)

Discursive activism, however, is not only about speaking out. As described in Bohman's (2004) definition of public sphere that was outlined in the previous chapter, the act of speaking requires an audience of listeners. In this sense, discursive practices were able to develop thanks to a new environment that allowed women to speak *and* be heard, namely the feminist counterpublics that were previously discussed. These groups provided a space for “new collective and political practices of listening that made their speech meaningful” (Serisier 2018:6). This stands in contrast with other institutional, legal and social spaces where women's voices and denouncement of sexual violence are often disbelieved, belittled or suppressed. Feminist discursive activism, then, means not only that women are able to speak out, but that this act of speaking is recognised as significant by its public, in contrast with other audiences that would deem it worthless or untrue.

It is now useful to come back to Fricker's concept of testimonial injustice that was provided in the previous chapter. By believing women's speech, feminist publics are actively combating widespread testimonial injustice by neutralising the impact of identity prejudice on their credibility judgement. They are thus displaying *testimonial justice* (Fricker 2007:92). This represents the promotion of “new grammars” in Young's definition of discursive activism: the creation of alternative epistemologies for feminist interpretations and understandings of reality.

Importantly, Boyle points out that the relationship between speaking out and consciousness-raising needs to be specified. Speaking out is often framed as being about “breaking the silence”, and is thus based on the assumption that gender violence is usually “unspeakable or invisible” (Boyle 2019:25) for most people, requiring women to voice its existence in order to make it known (cf. Loney-Howes 2018). But speaking out can also have the purpose of changing the public perspective on issues that are already known, but lack a feminist understanding, since gendered violence is normalised in patriarchal societies. In this sense, speaking out also entails consciousness-raising by “making visible *as violence* experiences which have not previously been understood in this way” (Boyle 2019:2). Again, this epistemological focus ties in with one of the concepts developed by Miranda Fricker, namely hermeneutical injustice (see chapter 1). Experiences of violence may not be recognised as such due to a gap in the collective hermeneutical resource; speaking out, then, has the purpose of redressing this injustice by changing public perspective on the issue in a way that more accurately reflects the lived experience of the victim.

Speaking out against sexual violence therefore represents one of the key political practices in the relationship between counter publics and mainstream publics. The practices of collective sharing and listening among feminists come to constitute what Fraser (1990) names “spaces of withdrawal and regroupment” (p. 68) for counterpublics. When these stories are brought out into the public sphere, they become a political intervention that challenges dominant culture. This intervention does not address solely the issue of sexual violence, but has the wider aim of transforming a rape-supportive culture by challenging the dominant patriarchal epistemology. These stories therefore have the objective of generating a discursive shift in the public sphere with regards to sexual violence and, consequently, gender equality more broadly. This shift can never be completely radical, since it occurs in a context where narratives and representations are already consolidated. Rather, this process “involves drawing on, reworking and incorporating the existing canon of stories and their discursive frameworks” (Serisier 2018:8).

Because existing discursive frameworks retain their epistemological power, the increased authority of feminists of the subject of sexual violence has not meant that

every woman can have her voice heard, or that all of the narratives that appear in the public sphere provide a feminist perspective. As speaking out moved from radical political practice to mainstream news story, it became increasingly divorced from feminist politics. Like most social movements, these stories need to be amplified through mass media in order to be heard. This, however, involves “significant trade-offs, some quite detrimental, to social movements, such as losing control of framing of events and also having to engage in tactics that may be advantageous to obtaining the crucial media coverage while injuring the desired message” (Tufekci 2013:852). Activists often find it difficult to control how their message is framed in the media. This has two particularly relevant consequences for the feminist practice of speaking out.

First, media (whether offline or online) pick and choose which stories they want to circulate. This often results in certain voices being privileged over others, with existing patterns of dominance and subordination being reproduced: as Fraser (1990) noted, the contributions of subaltern social groups are often excluded from the mainstream public sphere. The voices of white, privileged women are usually the ones that are amplified in the media; their stories often conform to idealised notions of victimhood and credibility. Existing inequalities can therefore be perpetuated as socially subordinated women are further silenced and marginalised in the collective narrative (Serisier 2018). This counters the original of purpose of speaking out, which should offer alternative avenues for justice beyond the legal system, especially for those whose identities or experiences are dismissed by institutions, allowing women to have their voices heard in spite of social inequalities. Instead, replicating the same inequalities in sexual violence narratives erases the potential of speaking out for alternative modes of justice.

The second and related consequence is that the individualisation and de-politicisation of speaking out. Once a story is taken up by the media, it is re-interpreted and re-framed in ways that may not be consistent with its author's original intentions. When the media engage with these stories, they are often cast as sensational news stories. The purpose of speaking out is now constructed as an individual endeavor, “as part of a personally therapeutic process” (Boyle 2019:29). The focus is shifted from a feminist

understanding of sexual violence as a social problem to an individual predicament to be overcome by the woman herself. In this way, speaking out becomes “increasingly divorced as a political project and practice from its feminist roots” (Serisier 2018:41). The drive for social change is now subsumed under individual empowerment and liberation. When framed this way, speaking out becomes antithetical to its originating practice of consciousness-raising, since consciousness-raising was part of a wider array of actions carried out within the feminist movement that require “intellectual, political and organisational work” (Boyle 2019:43). If speaking out becomes framed as being about an individual woman overcoming hardships on her own, the potential for radical societal transformation that second-wave feminists envisioned is lost. In this sense, in mainstream narratives the experience of surviving sexual violence and the fight against sexism become situated within a broader neoliberal framework that posits them as an individual choice and an individual project.

The depoliticization of women's stories has occurred somewhat in parallel to the popularization of speaking out: “[a]s survivor accounts have acquired greater cultural acceptance and a broader sympathetic audience, their public and cultural dissemination has come to exceed the discursive and political bounds of feminism” (Serisier 2018:12). Individuals who speak out against sexual violence may not identify as feminists, or they may not be portrayed as such in media accounts. McRobbie (2009) defines this the “double entanglement” of mainstream media's relationship with feminism, whereby feminism is implied as the background that allows these stories to be told, but is not explicitly named as relevant for contemporary society. It appears paradoxical, then, that survivors can speak out thanks to the legacy of the feminist movement, but feminist politics are removed from the narrative.

The consequence of this interpretative framework for speaking out is that “the personal remains personal”, as Boyle (2019:29) notes. The social change that should originate with individual narratives ends up being useful only to the woman herself, disconnected from other similar stories and incapable of turning into collective action. Or, as Banet-Weiser (2018:17) puts it, “the political is the personal”, since the legacy of the feminist movement loses its political value and becomes an object of consumption for individual empowerment.

The individualization and neoliberalisation of the feminist practice of speaking out has meant that its potential for radical societal change has been diminished. Despite its popularity, “the public success of speaking out has not universally resulted in the promotion of feminist understandings of rape” (Serisier 2018:41). It has been argued that anti-sexual violence activism constitutes a “successful failure” (Corrigan 2013) because, despite its popularity, it failed to promote feminist understandings of the issue and instead produced a “neoliberal carceral agenda<sup>3</sup>, whereby the initial goals of the movement that sought to ‘eliminate rape’ have been replaced with an overemphasis on criminal justice reforms and increasing convictions” (Loney-Howes 2020:2). This is partly due to a failure “to link women’s stories in a collective telling” (Boyle 2019:29); a failure that is attributable to the media’s control of women’s public narratives and their ability to reframe or distort the original meanings. In recent years, social media have been hailed as a new way for feminists to regain control over their own narratives and to come together to engage in collective action. (This theme is explored in the next chapter).

The relationship between feminist politics and the mediatization of feminist narratives is well captured by Banet-Weiser’s distinction between “*politics of visibility*” and “*economies of visibility*” (Banet-Weiser 2015, 2018). As it has emerged frequently throughout this chapter, discursive activism is central to feminist politics, and it is closely related to the politics of visibility. This describes “the process of making visible a political category (such as gender or race) that is and has been historically marginalized in the media, law, policy, etc.” (Banet-Weiser 2015:55). In this way, categories suffering from invisibility, under-representation, or flawed representation (such as stereotypes) demand increased or better visibility. Crucially, the ultimate objective of this pursuit of visibility is the production of social and political change. Visibility is political, then, because actors use it to highlight unjust power dynamics and effect change at a structural level.

Additionally, in the context of the current media and digital landscape, Banet-Weiser recognises also the emergence of *economies of visibility* that “shift politics of visibility so that visibility becomes the end rather than a means to an end” (2018:23). Economies

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<sup>3</sup> See Bernstein (2010, 2012) for the concept of “carceral feminism”.

of visibility are about making individuals (and especially individual bodies) visible on the basis of political categories such as race and gender, but without interrogating the structural inequalities that underpin such categories (see the discussion of “neoliberal feminism” in the Introduction). For example, for someone who buys and wears a t-shirt with the statement “This Is What a Feminist Looks Like”, “identifying oneself as someone who looks like a feminist becomes sufficient political action” (Banet-Weiser 2018:23). The political subject is transformed into an economic subject, who signals their affiliation by participating in advanced capitalist and commercial structures. The concept of economies of visibility can also be applied to mainstream stories of speaking. Publishing stories of “empowered” women is profitable in the current climate of popular feminism, but these narratives must be “reframed to conform with the structures of this economy: safe, palatable, friendly, and normative” (Banet-Weiser 2018:105). Feminism is thus made economically valuable, but politically harmless.

## Chapter 2

### Digital activism

Having outlined the historical importance of the public-private divide and of the role of public spheres, this chapter now moves these concepts into the current era to analyse how digital transformations have impacted these social structures and processes. The chapter is structured as follows: first it discusses how the public-private divide and public sphere theories are relevant to online discussions. Then it focuses on the specific role of digital activism and the growing scholarship on the topic. It then narrows down one specific form of digital activism: online feminism, and frames it as a type of discursive activism.

#### 1. Networked public spheres

Digital technologies have renewed the discussion on the role of political participation and the public sphere. At the centre of this discussion is, once again, the tension between the realms of public and private. The internet's promise of “unlimited and unregulated discourse that operates beyond geographic boundaries” led utopian thinkers to believe that digital media could bring about “a virtual reincarnation of the public sphere” in the Habermasian sense (Papacharissi 2008:3). As illustrated in the previous chapter, the public sphere is the space where the distinction between what is public and what is private is negotiated. In digital spaces, this translates to a discussion on whether participation in online activities can be defined as public – and thus having political relevance and impact – or as private – and thus inconsequential and illusionary in its potential for political change. The public-private dichotomy is further complicated by the fact that digital media blur many other traditional boundaries “between presence and absence, time and space, control and freedom, personal and mass communication, private and public, and virtual and real” (Baym & boyd 2012:320; see also boyd 2010).

This question has shaped much of the scholarly discussion on the role of digital media, and particularly social media, in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Techno-optimist scholars were quickly fascinated by the public sphere potential of the internet as it offered greater access to information to (seemingly) everyone, and increased reciprocity of communication (Shirky 2011). But while it is accepted that online media can provide better access to information, there is no consensus on whether this brings a direct increase in political participation or civic engagement. Social media users who are politically engaged online tend to be “relatively young, well-educated, and highly interested in politics” (Vaccari et al. 2015:232), with the risk of forming a new elite who can dominate political discussion. Consequently, it is only a privileged few who can have full access to this new public space, “thus harboring the illusion of an open public sphere” (Papacharissi 2008:9). In this sense there is a risk of replicating the same inequalities of access to the public sphere that were discussed in the previous chapter.

Similarly, reciprocity of communication is seen as necessary for online conversation in order to “truly help connect citizens of democracies, rather than reproduce fragmented spheres of conversation” (Papacharissi 2008:10). This means that online discussion should “involve two-directional communication, cover topics of shared interest, and be motivated by a mutually shared commitment in rational and focused discourse” (Papacharissi 2008:10). Yet it can be argued that this definition is once again holding up the concept of public sphere to needlessly high standards. As it was pointed out in Bohman's (2004) definition provided in chapter 1, modelling the public sphere on direct face-to-face interaction calls for temporal and spatial requirements that are only applicable to restrictive forms of public forum, such as the idealised 18<sup>th</sup> century salons and coffee houses. Instead, it is more fruitful to conceive of public interaction as involving a more indefinite audience and as unfolding over longer stretches of time and space. In this view,

a public sphere depends upon the opening up of a social space for a particular kind of repeated and open-ended interaction and, as such, requires technologies and institutions to secure its continued existence and regularize opportunities and access to it. (Bonham 2004:134)

Communications technology have historically been crucial to extending dialogue across space and time, going beyond the limits of face-to-face interaction. Writing represents the first of the technologies that served to amplify communication across the lines of space and time. This potential was furthered by the invention of the printed word, which in turn contributed to growing mass literacy in national public in modern times. These developments “produced the sort of mass audience that acquires the indefinite features proper to the public sphere” (Bohman 2004:134). Television and radio did not significantly alter the system that was in place by then, as they “only reduced entry requirements for hearers and raised the costs of adopting the speaker’s role to a mass audience” (Bohman 2004:134). Traditional mass media, then, facilitated the passive role of audience members while progressively raising the costs of active participation, thus limiting access to elites.

This is the key to understand the fascination with digital media as a potential public sphere. Like mass media before it, digital media further expands communication across time, by increasing its speed, and space, by increasing its scale. In contrast with mass media, however, which is a one-way channel of communication, digital media also changes the form of interaction by lowering the cost of many-to-many communication (Castells 2010). Digital media allows for “interaction with an indefinite and potentially large audience, especially with regard to adopting the speaker role” (Bohman 2004:134). As Baym & boyd (2012) summarise, “network architecture lowers the cost of becoming a speaker, meaning there can be more speakers, and that it is easier to perceive oneself as a possible speaker” (p. 326). The distinction between speaker and listener role is thus another boundary that becomes blurred, since users can pick and choose if and to what extent they wish to “contribute or listen to political talk” as they are able “to witness a broader variety of conversations and to achieve different types of balances between posting and reading about politics” (Vaccari et al. 2015:224).

It is precisely the lower cost of participation that led the more pessimist faction of digital scholars to contend that online activity represents a merely individual distraction and cannot be equated with political action at all. The term “slacktivism” has become widely used to describe “feel-good online activism that has zero political

or social impact” (Morozov 2009:n.p.). In this view, lower-threshold forms of political engagement that occur on digital media give people “an illusion of having a meaningful impact on the world without demanding anything more than joining a Facebook group” (Morozov 2009:n.p.). In fact, online activity may even prevent people from taking part in higher-threshold political engagement, since individuals may feel content with “slacktivist” participation and avoid more demanding political efforts. Similarly, the impact of such activities is also perceived as having little significance, since they take place on digital platforms which, by their own design, do not pose a veritable threat to the status quo (Gladwell 2010). In short, as Gladwell (2010) puts it, digital media “make it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact” (p. 49)

In a similar vein, Dean (2005) argues that digital media can become “a technological fetish onto which all sorts of fantasies of political action are projected” (p. 11), allowing people to forsake actual political engagement as they feel that technology is doing the political work for them. This illusion of politicisation actually produces *de-politicisation*, as individuals focus on activities that take place only in the private sphere, and fail to put in the commitment that actual politics requires:

By sending an e-mail, signing a petition, responding to an article on a blog, people can feel political. And that feeling feeds communicative capitalism insofar as it leaves behind the time-consuming, incremental and risky efforts of politics. [...] It is a refusal to take a stand, to venture into the dangerous terrain of politicization. (Dean 2005:119)

In contrast, Papacharissi (2010) views the privatisation of political activity as a positive feature of digital media. She argues that the move of political activities that used to take place in the public realm into the private realm is beneficial to individuals as it allows “greater autonomy, flexibility, and potential for expression” (Papacharissi 2010:21). Participating in the same online activities that Dean (2005) criticises, then, can be likened to “potentially powerful acts of dissent [that] emanate from a private sphere of interaction, meaning that the citizen engages and is enabled politically through a private media environment located within the individual’s personal and private space” (Papacharissi 2010:131). Due to the collapse of the boundaries between

public and private brought on by digital media, then, political activities now also take place within the private sphere.

In the 2010s, as digital media increasingly penetrated every aspect of social life, the scholarship moved beyond the utopian/dystopian binary, offering more articulate and critical perspectives on the “intricate dynamic between social media platforms, mass media, users, and social institutions” (van Dijck & Poell 2013:2).

In particular, networked technologies “configure the environment in a way that shapes participants’ engagement” (boyd 2010:39). Online publics are thus influenced by the distinct affordances of networked technologies, leading to the emergence of new dynamics for political participation. The notion of networked publics is used by danah boyd (2010) to describe “publics that are restructured by networked technologies”, meaning that they are not just “publics networked together, but they are publics that have been transformed by networked media” (pp. 39-42).

Building on the concept of networked publics, Papacharissi (2015) focuses on the central concept of “affect” as “the sum of—often discordant—feelings about affairs, public and private [...] as the energy that drives, neutralizes, or entraps networked publics” (p. 7). The role of affect is therefore crucial in shaping digital spaces and networked publics:

mediated technologies effectively construct electronic elsewheres—social spaces sustained through digitally enabled affective structures that support meaning-making and construction of marginalized viewpoints (Berry et al., 2010). These spaces can also be understood as *third places* [...] where social, cultural, political, and economic activities frequently converge give rise to political expressions aligned with individual repertoires of self-expression, lifestyle politics, and personal reinterpretations of the political [...]. These activities are increasingly supported by hybrid spaces blurring public and private, civic and consumption-based, collective and personal narratives that assemble the story of who we are, and these stories are personal and political. (Papacharissi 2015:24-25)

It is important to underline that these hybrid spaces differ from the idealised notion of a rational public sphere. However, through the creation of “a new grassroots outlet for the affective dimensions in politics” (Chadwick 2008:32), new forms of political engagement can potentially be generated. This perspective also helps overcome a

simplistic “emotion versus reason” dichotomy, by noting how affect and feeling can be the driving force behind movements that then “express rationally focused expressions of ideological beliefs” (Papacharissi 2015:7).

Castells (2015) makes similar remarks on the close relationship between technological affordances, affect and social movements:

[The] condition for individual experiences to link up and form a movement is the existence of a communication process that propagates the events and the emotions attached to it. [...] In our time, multimodal digital networks of horizontal communication are the fastest and most autonomous, interactive, reprogrammable and self-expanding means of communication in history. [...] The networked social movements of the digital age represent a new species of social movement. (Castells 2015:15)

Nevertheless, it must be kept in mind that digital spaces are not free spaces that allow endless, unrestrained political expression. The growing scholarship on digital platforms highlights how these do not represent a neutral space to be appropriated by users, but constitute far more complex “technocommercial assemblages, which shape and translate user activity” (Poell & van Dijck 2016:230). Platforms should be understood not only as economic and technological infrastructure, but also as cultural constructs that shape social interaction and cultural production (van Dijck 2013; van Dijck, Poell & De Wall 2018). Given the increasing centrality of digital media to all social life, processes of private and public communication are influenced by the commercial logics that underpin these platforms, forcing “all societal actors—including the mass media, civil society organizations, and state institutions—to reconsider and recalibrate their position in public space” (van Dijck & Poell 2015:1). The omnipresence of digital media also means that the boundaries between offline and online are increasingly blurred, so that it is hardly possible to discuss online phenomena as separate from the offline world. Instead, one must take into consideration the “intricate web of online and offline settings connected by a dynamic constellation of technological, economical, and socio-cultural mechanisms” (van Dijck & Poell 2013:3). This also implies that the slacktivist / activist critique loses some of its power, since it is based on a distinction between “real” and “virtual” worlds that is no longer relevant (Tufekci 2013:851). As Jensen (2011) argues, “while the early

emphasis on a divide between offline and online practices and - cyberspaces and virtual realities – may have been a necessary step for theory development of the 1990s, it has become increasingly counterproductive in methodological terms” (pp. 43-44).

## **2. Digital discursive activism**

Since much of the scholarship on digital media has focused on its role in restructuring the public sphere, a lot of attention has also been paid to its impact on political activism. The scholarship at the intersection of activism and digital media has grown rapidly, with a special focus on the use of social media platforms in the organisation, mobilisation and communication of political activities. The strategic role of social media in high-profile protests in the 2010s has been at the centre of much of this research, as exemplified by studies on the Arab Spring (e.g. Howard et al. 2011; Wolfsfeld, Segev & Sheaffer 2013; Bruns, Highfield & Burgess 2013), the Occupy movement (e.g. Juris 2012; DeLuca, Lawson & Sun 2012; Tremayne 2014), and anti-austerity protests in Europe (Castañeda 2012; Anduiza, Cristancho & Sabucedo 2014; Theocharis et al. 2015).

Feminist scholars have pointed out persistent gaps in the context of the current body of literature, specifically with regards to the understanding and framing of online political activism (Shaw 2012a, 2012b, 2012c; Clark 2016; Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer 2017). As it also emerged from the review of the literature presented in chapter 2, many mainstream digital scholars maintain a tendency to frame online activity as ancillary or preliminary to offline political activity. Offline activity, in the form of traditional mobilisation - such as demonstrations - is often presented as the primary form of true political engagement, whilst the political value of digital mobilisation is minimised and not recognised as a form of political action in its own right.

Shaw (2012a) calls attention to the frequent difficulties in recognising “disembodied” (p. 376) activism as such. She describes how common-sense perceptions of “activism” often conjure up physical, quasi-military imagery:

a spectacle that brings to mind images of a man in front of a tank, flowers thrust in the face of police officers or soldiers, unarmed civilians blinded by pepper spray or swept off their feet by water cannons. Internet activism seems to have no place amongst these images. (Shaw 2012a:376)

Such perceptions seem to imply that political activism should involve face-to-face communication, the proximity of bodies, and even the threat of physical risk. Additionally, the anonymity afforded by the internet also is perceived to be at odds with classical ideas of the public sphere – even though, as it has been shown, such publics should be conceived in a more indefinite manner.

Studies of digital activism have been more concerned with the internet as an instrument for the communication and organisation of existing social movements. For example, Gerbaudo (2012) frames the use of social media either “as a means of representation, a tool of ‘citizen journalism’ employed to elicit ‘external attention’”, or “as means of organisation of collective action, and more specifically as means of mobilisation in the crucial task of ‘getting people on the streets’” (p. 3). In this characterisation, digital communication functions either as a tool for dissemination of political activities to a wider audience, or as an organisational tool for the coordination of activists “on the streets”.

A similar view is expressed by Fuchs (2011), who perceives social media as threatening to substitute “real” political action:

I rather want to stress that social media cannot replace collective action that involves spatio-temporal presence. Social media can, given a good organization, high interest and a lot of resources, serve as protest co-ordination and organization tools. However, the reality of protests shows that they cannot replace collective protest action and experience. (p. 185)

The problem with this perspective is that it conceives of social media only as an instrument to obtain results “in the outside world” of traditional media and traditional political protest. This approach is steeped in a problematic “reification of the political/cultural binary” (Clark 2016:791) that hinders insightful analysis of the political potential of online discourses, resulting in “an instrumental view of culture in movements that sees the diffusion of ideas as mechanisms that will allow political action to take place, rather than as being political in themselves” (Shaw 2012c:72).

The functions of communication and organisation have indeed constituted some of the most notable features of both contemporary social movements and digital studies, and it is indispensable that they continue to be analysed. Yet what is often missing from these accounts is a conceptualisation of digital media as a political space in its own right. More precisely, the epistemological value of the discursive practices of social movements that was illustrated in the previous chapter is often overlooked. As Shaw (2012c) puts it, existing studies have undervalued “discursive activism as an aspect of activism that results in concrete individual and societal changes in ways of thinking, living, speaking, consuming, and practising politics” (p. 69). She emphasises the consequent need to develop an “understanding of online communities as structures for political action” (Shaw 2012b:374).

Accordingly, recent studies have focused more on the narrative and discursive nature of many forms of online activism. (e.g. Yang 2016; Hayes 2017; Kuo 2018) A particular type of protest that has attracted much attention is hashtag activism, that is, campaigns that are based around the use of the hashtag feature on social media. As Yang (2016) argues, “hashtag activism takes place when large numbers of comments and retweets appear on social media in response to a hashtagged word, phrase, or sentence. Because these comments and retweets consist of numerous personal stories and appear in temporal order, they assume a narrative form” (Yang 2016:14)

In this type of activism, the hashtag serves multiple purposes; it acts

as a discursive marker of the relationships of participants to other community members, as a mechanism for tracking and discussing unfolding political events and as an object that marks a particular form of communicative exchange within the wider context of public debate. (Sauter & Bruns 2015:48)

As a result, it would be inadequate to consider the use of hashtags in digital activism as merely a feature of social media: “they are tied up with other objects, subjects, contexts, events, relations, discourses and truths that extend well beyond the specific context of Twitter as a platform, or even the Internet more generally” (Sauter & Bruns 2015:48-49).

Such an approach allows to grasp how online activism can use discourse both as a means to receive outside attention – by popularising marginalised narratives – and as a political end in itself, by constituting a subaltern counterpublic. Indeed, as Bonilla & Rosa (2015) note in their discussion of anti-racism protest #Ferguson, hashtag activism has become a preferred tool of marginalised populations: “Whereas in most mainstream media contexts the experiences of racialized populations are overdetermined, stereotyped, or tokenized, social media platforms such as Twitter offer sites for collectively constructing counternarratives and reimagining group identities” (p. 6). Indeed, the way many hashtags protest stand in opposition to mainstream narratives can be observed in the wording of some of the most notable hashtag protests in recent years, such as #BlackLivesMatter, #BringBackOurGirls, #StopGamerGate and #OccupyEverywhere. Yang (2016) notes that these hashtags have in common an assertive and confrontational tone: they express “a strong sense of action and force. The actions are petitioning, demanding, appealing, and protesting. They express refusals, objections, and imperatives to take immediate action” (pp. 14-15). As a result, hashtag activism has become especially popular in struggles for racial justice and gender equality.

### **3. Feminist digital activism**

As described in the previous chapter, discourse plays a central role to feminist activism, and the new transformations of the digital era require a holistic understanding of all political practices, both online and offline, in order to fully comprehend the articulations of contemporary feminism: “feminist activism relies on articulation to make visible the hegemonic, taken-for-granted power structures that infuse daily life. Feminist social movement research, then, requires frameworks that highlight the political nature of discourse, on- and offline” (Clark 2016:791).

Scholars who have researched feminist digital activism, such as Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer (2017), are keen to stress its political nature:

digital communication strategies are being used not only to support political action, they are political action in themselves. Feminists are using digital platforms to do the discursive work -- such as opposition to oppressive practices, sharing and reflecting on experience critically, creating and calling on new frameworks of knowledge (as well as others we note such as boundary creation and maintenance) -- that constitute collective identity/collective consciousness. (Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer 2017:10)

Indeed, the age of the growth of social media has seen a parallel resurgence in feminist activity, which has taken place online, offline and or a combination of the two. Banet-Weiser (2018) notes how the visibility of contemporary feminism has been enhanced by social media platforms, which have allowed for a greater circulation of feminist ideas in more mainstream spaces. This renewed activity has gone hand in hand with new attention to an analysis of feminist discursive practices, with particular attention to those that have taken place on blogs and on social networking sites (e.g. Keller 2012, 2015; Shaw 2012a, 2012b; Mendes, Ringrose & Keller 2019; Loney-Howes 2020):

contemporary feminists are using digital media [...] to achieve many of the same discursive goals – for example, to build collective consciousness and to articulate a social protest – that have previously been achieved using other communications strategies such as pamphlets, consciousness raising groups, publishing collectives, bookstore networks, media strategies, and zaps. (Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer 2017:4)

This view ties in with the concept of subaltern counterpublic that was illustrated in the previous chapter. In Fraser's own example, feminist groups used discursive practices to “formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” and “help expand discursive space” (Fraser 1990:67). These activities are “directed toward wider publics” with the aim of challenging dominant discursive norms.

In this sense, it can be suggested that feminist online spaces constitute subaltern counterpublic, as they function both as “spaces of withdrawal and regroupment” for like-minded individuals and “as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics” (Fraser 1990:68), since their efforts aim to have an impact on mainstream audiences.

A connection between classical feminist activism and more recent digital practices is also identified by Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer (2017) in their work on the Twitter campaign #YesAllWomen. Similarly to the “dual character” described by Fraser (1990:68), the authors observe how the online protest took two forms. First, the hashtag #YesAllWomen functioned “as a site of collective identity/collective consciousness” (Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer 2017:4) that was discursively achieved. Second, given the large-scale of the online mobilization, the hashtag also functioned as “a public protest or agenda-building event that impacted public discourse” (Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer 2017:5), since its content was amplified on other platforms and media beyond Twitter.

The role of online media as a space for collective identity, connection and resistance is well documented in a number of studies on different feminist protests. For example, in her focus on Australian feminist blogs, Shaw (2012b) analyses the protests against a radio station that included no women in their list of the best 100 rock songs of all time. This exclusion led female bloggers to discuss and criticise the shortcomings of the list among them, and to promote change by emailing the radio station and by circulating their own lists of the best women artists. A new awareness was also elaborated that went beyond the individual case, as it led to a wider conversation on how “taste cultures become male-dominated by excluding women from the discourse of greatness” and on “the way people are socialised to think of ‘history’ in general” (Shaw 2012b:280).

In this sense, the use of digital media may help to overcome some of the problems with mainstream framing of feminist messages, as discussed in the previous chapter.

By using participatory media, activists

can forcefully offer their framing, diffuse their preferred framing to large audiences in ways that would have been simply impossible or prohibitively costly before social media, challenge journalists directly, or create a strong enough attention (“buzz”) around their own framing that it becomes harder to ignore. (Tufekci 2013:253)

#### 4. Hashtag feminism

The recent popularity of hashtag activism has been especially relevant for feminist protest on social media. Because the structure of hashtags enables the collection of individual stories that share a common background, this form of protest has proven particularly apt to replicate the feminist practice of speaking out against sexual violence that was previously illustrated. Hashtags such as #YesAllWomen, #SafetyTipsForLadies, #StopStreetHarassment, #WhyIStayed and #BeenRapedNeverReported have been used to collect stories on the topics of domestic violence, street harassment, and sexual violence and rape culture in general, often through the sharing of first-person narratives (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller 2019).

While hashtags are used for a variety of online protests, many with a narrative form (e.g. #BlackLivesMatter, see Yang 2016), their widespread use and continuing popularity by feminist activists is especially notable, and falls within the wider “revival” of feminism – online and offline – that was described in the Introduction and in chapter 1. As a result, the term “hashtag feminism” was coined to describe “the use of online platforms and their hashtag feature to counter or condemn discrimination, violence and sexual assault against women, sometimes offering analyses from an intersectional stance” (Myles 2018:509). Like other the forms of online activity that were previously described, hashtags also perform functions of aiding internal organisation and eliciting external attention. Hashtags have been described as “both a tool and a space for digital feminist activism” (Linabary, Corple & Cooky 2019:2), in the sense that they facilitate action directed at wider publics, and also provide “a space to exchange stories, politicize experiences, and collectively organize” (Linabary, Corple & Cooky 2019:2). Hashtags thus contribute to “the creation and the sustainment of different types (networked, intimate, ad hoc, counter, etc.) of publics, communities or movements” (Myles 2018:509-510).

The stories told through the hashtag can be placed in the wider framework of the feminist practice of speaking out that was described in chapter 1. Indeed, a parallel between classical feminist practices of consciousness-raising and speak outs and contemporary forms of online activism has been drawn by a number of authors (Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer 2017; Serisier 2018; Clark-Parsons 2019). The

relationship between discursive activism, digital mobilisation and classical feminist practices is well explained by Clark-Parsons (2019):

A hashtag's aggregation of individual expressions under a collectively shared framework parallels the feminist practice of making the personal political. Feminist hashtags symbolically index a set of personal experiences that, while varied in their specific details, are rooted in a shared context of oppression. In this way, hashtag feminism engages in a performative politics of visibility, in which one person's narrative, when shared and connected with many others, makes power visible so that it might be deconstructed and challenged. Like the discursive activism of previous generations, hashtag feminists' performative speech popularizes alternative epistemologies for interpreting and responding to injustices. (Clark-Parsons 2019:8)

Given the widespread use and high participation in hashtag mobilizations, these stories “come together in a genre, marked and bounded by a hashtag, and with structures, limits and rules for participation” (Serisier 2018:96). One of the key features of hashtags is that they allow the repetition and aggregation of similar content. This generates what has differently been termed “intensification” (Tomlinson 2010), a “meme event” (Thrift 2014) or “semantic thickness” (Serisier 2018).

Intensification refers to “a rhetorical practice where particular examples of types of discourse are collected together to demonstrate a repeated discursive pattern” (Shaw 2016). The juxtaposition of large numbers of similar discourses has the effect of making public and increasing the visibility of the experiences of women that are often made invisible in mainstream discourse, which then must be reckoned with by the public. Through this tangible repetition of patterns, similar discourses are identified and reified into points of reference for future discussion.

A similar structure is recognised with the concept of meme event, which has been modeled by Thrift (2014) on the notion of “media event” to describe “a digitally mediated episode that not only references a specific incident [...] but itself evolves into a reference point for interpreting other phenomena” (Clark 2016:800). For example, the Twitter hashtag #WhyIStayed was created in 2014 in response to the controversy surrounding NFL player Ray Rice, who was guilty of domestic violence, and whose wife was repeatedly asked by the mainstream media “why she stayed”,

presenting her as complicit in her abuse. Through the hashtag, thousands of women shared their own “reasons for staying”, turning the single episode into a wider rebuke against “the victim-blaming myths framing the dominant discourse concerning domestic and sexual violence” (Clark 2016:798). Because it carries out a feminist intervention against dominant media discourses, a feminist meme event constitutes “a memetic disruption of dominant discourses denying the prevalence of misogynist violence” (Thrift 2014:1091). In this way, Twitter users “pushed their counter-frame until it became a central referent for the public’s understanding of *not only the Ray Rice case, but domestic violence more generally*” (Clark 2016:800, emphasis added). A hashtag campaign therefore begins as a response to a news event, and then develops into a confrontation of mainstream narratives on feminist issues, challenging problematic accounts and offering alternative interpretations. This also helps positioning what mainstream accounts would describe as a single incident – such as a high-profile case of domestic violence – into a wider culture of widespread sexist violence.

Serisier (2018) introduces an additional element to this conceptualisation with the notion of “semantic thickness”. This describes how the large-scale repetition of stories through the hashtag contributes to increasing their *credibility*. Through their contextualisation on social media, she argues, “individual stories that might struggle to obtain hearing of belief on their own are granted significance, credibility and validation as part of the collective story” (Serisier 2018:103). If an individual story conforms to the rules of the genre that have been established, they are more likely to be accepted as true, since they gain strength from sharing characteristics with multiple other accounts.

Another key element of hashtags is the role played by inference and contextualisation by readers (Serisier 2018:100). When added to a post, a hashtag signals the author's intent to participate in the collective storytelling. Given the brevity of social media texts, especially in the case of Twitter, posts are often concise and stories do not provide detailed accounts; through the use of the hashtag, readers can infer a more complete context for each narrative. As will be further explored in the next chapter, this process was exacerbated in #MeToo, where the initial call to arms simply asked to

post the words “Me too”, in order to emphasise the commonality of the experience rather than the particularities of each case.

The way in which individual posts are incorporated into wider political discourses is well captured by the concept of “connective action” developed by Bennett & Segerberg (2012). This is also useful to explain how the structure of online activism differs from traditional forms of political mobilization. The purpose of the author is to explain why individuals participate in political movements in a world where the influence of the highly organised structures of traditional forms of collective action is greatly weakened. In digital activism the drive for individuals to mobilise is to be found in “the self-motivated (though not necessarily self-centered) sharing of already internalized or personalized ideas, plans, images, and resources with networks of others” (Bennett & Segerberg 2012:753). Digital protests, then, come into being “through the organizational processes of social media, and their logic does not require strong organizational control or the symbolic construction of a united ‘we’” (Bennett & Segerberg 2012:748). Starting with highly personal narratives, individual stories (and individual posts) turn into collective action when they are linked together through digital networks.

The concept of connective action helps to explain how digital feminism can be likened to earlier forms of feminist political activism. In the same way as previous generations of feminists would share and circulate their stories in consciousness-raising meetings, these feminist hashtags manage to connect a wide variety of personal experiences relating to sexual harassment and sexual violence on social media (Clark-Parsons 2019). Transcending the particularity of each individual story, the use of a common hashtag serves to reveal their common origin in patriarchal cultures and in gender inequality, and to publicise the widespread nature of sexual violence.

## **5. Critiques of digital feminism**

While digital feminist activism has become increasingly popular and praised for its emancipatory potential, there has simultaneously been a growing concern that digital spaces can “reproduce and reinforce hierarchies of gender, class, sexuality and race”

(Loney-Howes 2020:11). In particular, much attention has been paid to “networked misogyny” (Banet-Weiser & Miltner 2016) or “mediated misogyny” (Vickery & Everbach 2018). These terms identify “an especially virulent strain of violence and hostility towards women in online environments” (Banet-Weiser & Miltner 2016:171) as one of the key obstacles to feminist activity on digital platforms. The majority of the literature has so far focused on the actions of individuals or communities of individuals who target women with misogynist harassment and abuse (e.g. Jane 2014, 2016; Cole 2015; Massanari 2017). However, in order to understand the complexity of the challenges to online feminism, it is more useful to adopt a “technosocial” approach that “takes both socio-cultural and technological factors into account, but also understands these as co-constitutive of one another” (Ging & Siapera 2018:517; see also Wajcman 2010; Massanari 2017). In this view,

online misogyny cannot be reduced to isolated antagonisms between individuals or to the outpourings of frustrated trolls (though it certainly does include these) but is rather the product of systemic misogyny and sexism in the wider culture, combined with the technological affordances of various platforms and their attendant (sub)cultures, which have served to augment, amplify, and polarise contemporary gender politics. (Ging & Siapera 2018:522)

Following this suggestion, then, critiques of online feminism are here grouped into three categories, roughly based on the actors that they involve: online feminists themselves, anti-feminist individuals, and digital platforms. Although these critiques may be directed at more than one groups of actors, and indeed they often are, it is useful to employ this distinction for the sake of clarity.

The first category of critiques is concerned with the perpetuation of existing inequalities in online communities. In spite of “techno-optimist” hopes of free access and free participation, online activity is not truly disembodied and the same power relations that exist offline continue to matter. This is especially relevant from an intersectional stance, since it has been shown how the contributions of women of colour to digital feminism are often erased (Daniels 2016). Similarly, women of colour “have been criticized for using social media to challenge white supremacy within digital feminism, reproducing problematic narratives that blame women of color for

being aggressive, difficult, and disruptive” (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller 2019:19). Both on digital platforms and in mainstream media, it is the speech of privileged white women that receives the most attention, and white voices end up dominating the conversation. This is particularly problematic in instances where online movements were started by women of colour and were subsequently appropriated by white women. Such episodes demonstrate how the potential for wider access and solidarity become interlinked with the persistence of existing privileges and power structures (Boyle 2019:31). An example that illustrates these dynamics is the case of the #YesAllWomen campaign. The hashtag was started by Muslim activist Kaye M. in 2014 in response to the shooting carried out by Elliot Rodger in Isla Vista, California; the killer was largely motivated by racist and misogynist ideology. The hashtag thus had the initial objective of highlighting how the problem of racist and misogynist violence affect “all women”. With over 1.2 million posts and shares, the hashtag gained notable visibility. However, the initial intent of its creator and other activists who participated to spread an intersectional perspective ended up being “marginalized and suppressed” (Serisier 2018:97) within the online conversation, as mainstream media gave more space to the voices of white women. Additionally, the hashtag creator reported having received a disturbing number of threats and insults on her Twitter profile in response to her campaign, in line with the wider trend of well-documented online violence against women and especially women of colour (Jane 2014; Megarry 2014).

This aspect also concerns the second category of actors: digital platforms, and particularly their inefficiency in managing incidents of online harassment. Because all interactions and connections that occur online are monetised, it is in the interest of platforms not to intervene even when activity that may be harmful to some users is taking place (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller 2019). As a result, platforms often fail to protect their users, especially when they are individuals who are already socially marginalised, hindering the potential for online spaces to be freely accessible to all. Episodes such as #YesAllWomen reveal how the dynamics among the three types of actors – feminist communities, anti-feminists and digital platforms – can reduce the possibilities for online activism as they fail to actively combat existing inequalities.

Because platforms fail to offer institutional protection, feminist online activism can be said to fall under the neoliberal framework that produces “a new feminist subject who is incited to accept full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care” (Rottenberg 2019:42). Specifically, through digital platforms women are encouraged to speak out on social media as a form of empowerment, as this creates profitable content and traffic. Yet, by speaking out in a public space, women are also vulnerable to becoming the target of sexist attacks and harassment, which platforms may conveniently ignore. To summarise,

we need to be cautious in celebrating the opportunities created by social media to engage in feminist political action. Indeed, when a feminist hashtag goes viral [...] it is profitable for Twitter. Likewise, [...] online hate (including misogyny, racism, and homophobia) is also profitable, creating value for platforms that work as a disincentive to enact policies that combat such practices. (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller 2019:31)

Another issue that emerges concerns the continuing importance of visibility for contemporary feminism. On this point, Megarry (2018) argues that the public nature of online conversations may actually be damaging to feminist struggles. Again, these involve all three categories of actors. First, it is important to critically consider the fact that feminist communities are carrying out their discussion in a public forum. This can be contrasted with the practices of second-wave feminists, who met in separate, female-only organizations and spaces and operated in settings that were private and shielded from the intrusion of the (male-dominated) public. In contrast, the activism that currently takes place on social media occurs in spaces which are, as it has been previously stated, inherently public.

In this respect, then, the conceptualisation of online feminism as a renewed version of older feminist practices can be contested precisely on the grounds of the distinction between public and private. Online spaces are public and accessible to anyone – including men – and they can be monitored by the private companies that own them. This means that feminist conversations are continuously subject to outside scrutiny, depriving them of the possibility to develop in a truly free, protected environment. This scrutiny also means that feminists may often feel compelled to make their

activism more palatable to wider, heterogenous audiences, thus distorting their thought (Megarry 2018).

The publicness of conversations also means that activists are further exposed to contestation from others. This can take the form of discursive contestation trying to disparage feminist work, or it can take the form of online and offline harassment and violence, as previously mentioned. By having access to their public conversations, antagonists can use digital platforms as a tool to monitor feminists, turning social media into an instrument for the surveillance of feminist activity.

Taken together, these critiques call into question whether the current focus on “visibility” is truly beneficial to feminist politics. The embeddedness of current activism into techno-commercial platforms leaves it susceptible “to commodification, recuperation, and depoliticization” (Fraser 1995:163). As Clark-Parsons (2019) notes, digital protests

flow through the attention economy of commercial media, where clicks, likes, ratings, and ad revenues are the primary goals and where experiences as complex as sexual violence is easily simplified and commodified. Moreover, because systems of inequality structure access to representation in the marketplace, economies of visibility compound intersecting oppressions by further marginalizing underprivileged groups. (p. 5)

## Chapter 3

### Researching #MeToo

This chapter illustrates the research project. It first introduces the #MeToo movement as the object of the research, explaining how it emerged and its significance for feminist politics. It then presents the aims of this study, the research design and the methodological choices that it involved.

#### 1. Setting the stage for #MeToo

Having provided an overview of the concept of counter-public spheres, and its relevance for digital feminist activism, I now focus on the case of the #MeToo movement as the most visible and, arguably, influential online feminist protest in recent years. The main goal is to assess the claim that has emerged in previous studies that online feminist campaigns can function as counter-public spheres by influencing the issues and the viewpoints that are included in mainstream discussion.

Before explaining what #MeToo is and what it represents, it is necessary to provide some context for its emergence. The previous chapter described the increased *popularity* of feminism in the 2010s, and especially its widespread visibility in the media (Banet-Weiser 2018). Feminist activists focused especially on issues such as sexual violence, sexual harassment and rape culture in general, with protests and campaigns gaining prominence both online and offline.

The newly re-found feminist sensibility has led to a generalised concern with the prevalence of sexual assault and sexual harassment, and with the culture that condones it. This includes high-profile sexual assault cases, where public attention was directed at persisting rape myths, victim-blaming and lack of accountability for men's actions. More notably, perhaps, the 2010s have also seen a number of famous and powerful men outed as sexual abusers, with particular attention placed on the

“culture of silence” that enabled their predatory behaviour to continue over many years or decades (Matthews 2019).

For example, in 2004 actor and comedian Bill Cosby was first accused of drugging and sexually assaulting numerous women over the course of decades. It was only in 2014, when a clip of a stand-up comedian denouncing Cosby went viral, that the mainstream public became aware of his actions and began condemning him. In 2015, New York magazine photographed and interviewed 35 of Cosby's accusers for a cover story; the article begins with the claim that “more has changed in the past few years for women who allege rape than in all the decades since the women's movement began” (Malone 2015). Following the media spotlight, public figures and institutions began distancing themselves from Cosby, including those who had previously supported him, until he was sentenced to prison in 2018.

A similar change in sensibility can arguably be observed in public reactions of sexual assault allegations against critically acclaimed film *auteurs* Woody Allen and Roman Polanski. The case involving Woody Allen dates back to 1992-1993, when he and then-wife Mia Farrow went through a bitter divorce that included a custody battle for their children. Mia Farrow accused Allen of molesting their 7-year-old daughter Dylan; he underwent a trial, was declared innocent and the case was hardly discussed in the following 20 years (Salek 2016). In 2014, however, the Farrow family took to Twitter to remind the public of Allen's alleged actions, which generated controversy in the media and among fans of the celebrities. The “online firestorm” initiated by the Farrows, then, reignited the debate on Allen's merits and “helped shift a microblogging character assault into a macrocultural controversy” (Salek 2016:478). In 2016, Allen's son, journalist Ronan Farrow, wrote an article drawing explicit connections between his father's behaviour and Cosby's, denouncing “the culture of acquiescence surrounding his father” (Farrow 2016).

A similar pattern of growing cultural unrest involves Roman Polanski, who in 1977 pleaded guilty of drugging and raping a 13-year-old girl, then fled from justice and spent most of the following decades avoiding countries where he could risk being extradited for his crime. In 2009, he was arrested in Zurich and remained in custody until Swiss authorities rejected the U.S. request for extradition. The case generated

controversy in France and in the U.S., with many political and film personalities either defending or condemning Polanski. Both the Allen and the Polanski episodes show how in the 2010s there had been growing controversy on the subject of violence against women and girls at the hand of powerful men. Although many continued to support the two directors, especially on the basis of their artistic merits (Marghitu 2018), these examples show an incremental shift in public opinion on the acceptability of men's predatory behaviour and on individual accountability. As it will be later discussed, this shift was further exacerbated during and after #MeToo.

Another event that markedly set the stage for #MeToo can be identified with the election of Donald Trump to President of the United States in 2016. Many protests have taken place, in the U.S. as well as internationally, against Trump's campaign rhetoric and against his actions while in office. Protesters opposed Trump's anti-progressive values on issues such as gender equality, reproductive rights and immigration (Fisher, Dow & Ray 2017). In particular, in 2016 the Washington Post published a leaked audio tape of Trump making sexually aggressive comments towards women. The tape received "universal condemnation" from all political factions and represented the first time that "a presidential candidate's own words expressed such graphic, lewd, and abusive language about women" (Rhodes et al. 2020:2). In response to Trump's comments, the hashtag #NotOkay was used by thousands of women to share sexual assault stories and to proclaim that the content of the tape should not be minimised. The most notable protest, however, took place offline. More than two million people participated in the Women's March that took place on 21 January 2017 (the day after Trump's Inauguration), making it one of the largest protests ever observed in the United States (Fisher, Dow & Ray 2017). The main demonstration took place in Washington, DC, while hundreds of other events were organised across the United States and internationally.

There is an evident contradiction between the increased popularity of feminism and the election to President of the United States of a known misogynist; this tension is well encapsulated in Banet-Weiser's (2018) concept of "popular misogyny", constructed in opposition to "popular feminism". Popular misogyny encompasses both the permanence of sexism at all social and institutional levels, and the more

recent backlash against the new generation of feminism. As Löffler, Luyt & Starck (2020) note, sexism and misogyny are “newly emerging versions of right-wing populism: [...] they oppose feminism and gender-equality measures, same-sex marriage and gender studies; they seek to re-instantiate traditional family and associated gender roles; and they pursue a strong-man style of political leadership” (p. 1). The revitalisation of populist and conservative politics across Western countries has contributed to invigorating sexist ideas and policies (Banet-Weiser 2018; Rottenberg 2019). In this sense, the revival of feminist protests since the 2010s can also be understood as a backlash against the newfound institutional legitimisation of conservative views on gender.

## **2. Harvey Weinstein**

The climate of increased public hostility toward sexual predators is the background to understand the chain of events that initiated in the autumn of 2017.

On 5 October 2017, the New York Times published a major news story titled “Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades” by Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey (2017). The article uncovered three decades of sexual harassment and assault perpetrated by Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein against young actresses and employees of his production company, over whom he typically exerted significant professional power. A second story containing further allegations against Weinstein was published a few days later in the New Yorker, on 10 October 2017, authored by Ronan Farrow (2017).

As it would later become widely known, Weinstein's abusive behaviour had long been an “open secret” in Hollywood that had never been challenged so directly and so publicly before the New York Times exposé (Boyle 2019). This was in part due to the use of non-disclosure agreements by Weinstein's lawyers with the women who did challenge him; but, generally, Weinstein was shielded by his own authority and power in the film industry, meaning that most of his victims – and people who were aware

of his conduct – were not in a position to speak up against him<sup>4</sup>. Weinstein was also a long-time supporter of the Democratic Party and was known as a champion of liberal and progressive causes. As a result, most of those around him were effectively complicit in tolerating, enabling and normalising his abuse.

Indeed, it is fundamental to point out that Weinstein's behaviour was not commonly recognised *as abuse*; rather, it was perceived as an acceptable part of his role as a “ruthless but successful producer in the mould of the misogynist moguls of Hollywood’s still-celebrated Golden Era” (Boyle 2019:84). This was also the excuse first evoked by Weinstein himself in a statement released in early October 2017: “I came of age in the 60’s and 70’s, when all the rules about behavior and workplaces were different. That was the culture then” (“Statement From Harvey Weinstein” 2017). Similarly, his lawyer also identified changing cultural norms as responsible for Weinstein's behaviour: “As a women's rights advocate, I have been blunt with Harvey and he has listened to me. I have told him that times have changed, it is 2017, and he needs to evolve to a higher standard. [...] He is an old dinosaur learning new ways” (“Statement From Harvey Weinstein” 2017).

The good faith of these responses is questionable, considering the energy and money Weinstein put into concealing his actions through non-disclosure agreements and silencing of his victims. What is interesting, however, is the emphasis placed on the role of “culture”, which brings up a number of important points concerning feminist politics; this is also the reason why the investigations against Weinstein had such a meaningful impact on public discussion. First, the exposés highlighted the systemic nature of sexual violence; in Weinstein's case, it became apparent that the problem lied not only with the actions of an individual man, but with a wider culture of complicity in the media and film industries. This stands in opposition to common sense conceptualizations of sexual violence as the isolated, extraordinary acts of “aberrant” men (Stanko 1985:10). Instead, the long-standing and widely known misconduct unveiled by the journalists inevitably requires an understanding of

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<sup>4</sup> A number of public references to Weinstein's behaviour had been made before 2017, but they had not attracted much public attention, as detailed by Boyle (2019).

violence that also includes the wider context where the abuse takes place. This is in line with a feminist conceptualization of sexual violence that rejects the dichotomy between “typical” and “aberrant” behaviour and, rather, focuses on understanding violence as the result of a wider culture that legitimises and normalises misogyny:

For this kind of abuse to continue relatively unchallenged requires the cultural normalisation of men’s sexual violation of women and this cultural normalisation functions as an alibi for abusive men, not least by rendering so many others complicit. [...] This allows men’s violence to remain hidden as violence despite—as we have heard so often since October 2017—a prevailing sense that this is also common knowledge. (Boyle 2019:78)

A second and related point is the focus on the entertainment industry and especially on young, attractive female celebrities in Hollywood. Because Weinstein took advantage of these young women's professional ambitions, promising success and fame in exchange for sexual compliance, his victims were seen as complicit in their own abuse. This perceived dynamic easily maps onto Hollywood stereotypes of the powerful, ruthless producer and the sexually available, eager actress (Boyle 2019). This understanding of the relationship was used to conceal the abuse while it was still occurring, by presenting it as a mutually consensual, and mutually beneficial, exchange. The same reasoning was also used to discredit the victims once the allegations had been made public: the now-famous actresses were often portrayed in the media as willingly having traded sexual favours for success (Royal 2019). In many cases, Weinstein's victims did not conform to common sense stereotypes of survivors of sexual violence, since they maintained close professional relationships with him over the years, and in some cases also had consensual sexual encounters with him.

### **3. The #MeToo hashtag campaign**

This context must be kept in mind to understand the events that followed the Weinstein revelations. As the public controversy reached international proportions, feminists took to social media to participate in the debate. The first collective digital protest began in Italy, when on 12 October 2017 writer Giulia Blasi suggested to a 300-person Facebook group to use the hashtag #quellavoltache (“that time when”) to share

incidents of sexual assault<sup>5</sup>. The aim was “to collect stories of harassment, unwanted advances, situations in which we felt threatened or unsafe and we knew nobody would believe us in case things took a turn for the worse” (Blasi 2019). The hashtag quickly spread to Twitter and Instagram. On the following day, 13 October 2017, French journalist Sandra Muller similarly launched the hashtag #balancetonporc (“denounce your pig”) on Twitter to ask women to “give the name and details of a sexual harasser you encountered at work”<sup>6</sup>.

Finally, the global hashtag #MeToo was created on 15 October 2017, when actress Alyssa Milano tweeted:

Me Too.

Suggested by a friend: “If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote “Me Too” as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem”. (@AlyssaMilano, 15 October 2017)

Like previous feminist interventions, #MeToo<sup>7</sup> targeted the Weinstein case and the mainstream discourse around it with the aim of disseminating a feminist understanding of the events. Milano's tweet only implicitly referred to Weinstein, and aimed to shift the focus to the wider cultural context that normalises sexual violence and to the prevalence of victim-blaming attitudes. In this sense, #MeToo functioned in a very similar manner to the feminist hashtags that had been prevalent in the 2010s; its aim was to challenge the portrayal of gender violence as an “aberrant act” carried out by individual men by exposing the “magnitude of the problem” faced by women.

It is important to note that the phrase “Me Too” had actually first been used by activist and community organiser Tarana Burke. Burke's Me Too movement represents “an intersectional demand for support and recognition for young women of colour who had experienced sexual abuse, as well as a statement of solidarity” (Boyle 2019:5).

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<sup>5</sup> Because the Facebook group was private, the original post is not included in full here.

<sup>6</sup> “#balancetonporc !! toi aussi raconte en donnant le nom et les détails un harcèlement sexuel que tu as connu dans ton boulot. Je vous attends” (@LettreAudio, 13 October 2017).

<sup>7</sup> From this point on, “#MeToo” refers to the entire hashtag campaign, including the local declinations of the hashtag, unless otherwise specified.

Whilst Milano later acknowledged her role, Burke felt conflicted about the unexpected appropriation of her work:

While it's true that I have been widely recognized as the "founder" of the movement – there is virtually no mention of my leadership. Like I just discovered something 12 years ago and in 2017 it suddenly gained value.  
#metooMVMT #metoo (@TaranaBurke, 21 February 2018)

The fact that a movement started by a Black woman was co-opted by white celebrities, and that its intersectional stance was mostly forgotten in the subsequent public discourse, reveals how marginalised voices can be dismissed in collective narratives, and how even progressive movements can reproduce inequalities and hierarchical power relations. This dynamic represents one of the most criticised aspects of #MeToo, and is seen as a major weakness for the feminist impact of the movement (Serisier 2018; Boyle 2019).

Given its immense popularity and use by millions of individuals, it is especially difficult to find a univocal definition of what #MeToo is and to identify its central characteristics. For example, in her analysis of the online comments on a New York Times opinion piece on #MeToo, Worthington (2020) found that many users who held opposite viewpoints on the content of the article all claimed to support #MeToo and feminism, "demonstrating multiple understandings of what #MeToo stands for and what it means to be feminist" (p. 18).

Based on Milano's tweet, a broad description of #MeToo can be put forward as an instance of "publicly discussing personal stories of sexual harassment" in order to "undertake visible consciousness-raising and highlight misogyny and sexism within online and offline spaces" (Gleeson & Turner 2019:57-58). However, while this definition is technically accurate, it could equally be applied to the other feminist hashtags that had been developed and disseminated in the 2010s; but #MeToo had far more significant reach and impact than its predecessors. In order to fully understand the exceptionality of #MeToo, a number of factors that define its specificity must also be examined.

First, the vast number of individuals that took part in the online campaign is noteworthy. The social media initiative that originated with Milano's tweet received

widespread participation and immediately went viral. In the first 24 hours, the actress received around 32,000 replies to her tweet, with #MeToo becoming the top trending hashtag on Twitter (Sayej 2017); 4.7 million people also used the hashtag in over 12 million posts on Facebook (Park 2017). In the following 45 days, it is estimated that the hashtag was posted over 85 million times across social media, covering 85 countries around the world (Sayej 2017). By September 2018, almost one year after the initial tweet, #MeToo had appeared in more than 19 million posts on Twitter, averaging 55,319 uses of the hashtag per day (Anderson & Toor 2018). By comparison, when the hashtag #YesAllWomen trended in May 2014 it appeared in 1.6 million tweets and retweets in the first three days; within a month, it had reached around half a million tweets and 1.48 million retweets (Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer 2017). The influence of the U.S. based #MeToo campaign can also be seen in the languages used in the tweets; in its first year, 71% of #MeToo tweets worldwide were in English, while the remaining 29% were in other languages (Anderson & Toor 2018). Additionally, hundreds of new or spinoff hashtags were modelled after #MeToo specifically for certain languages or certain sections of society (Pollack 2019; Zacchia, Corsi & Botti 2019).

#### **4. More than a hashtag: significance of #MeToo**

The extraordinary proportions of the hashtag campaign served to feed the media clamour that had already been stirred by the New York Times and New Yorker articles. The combined effort of mainstream media and online activists generated repercussions that went far beyond the realm of investigative journalism and social media. #MeToo followed a distinct pattern: the initial revelations against Weinstein triggered the outpouring of stories on social media; the magnitude of the online campaign was then reported by mainstream media, and in turn this fueled more exposés on the misconduct of more individuals, leading to a wider discussion on the problem of sexual violence. This chain reaction of events also meant that soon #MeToo was no longer limited to the film industry, as it brought forward accusations against other powerful men in a variety of fields and institutions, including sports, medicine, politics and academia (Boyle 2019). The long-term permanence and far-

reaching impact that #MeToo obtained differentiates it from previous feminist hashtags, which usually had a shorter life and more limited consequences.

In order to understand how #MeToo went from a hashtag to a movement, it is necessary to recall the concept of “meme event” (Thrift 2014) that was described in the previous chapter. Through the repetition of similar hashtagged stories, the purpose of #MeToo is to highlight the prevalence of misogynistic violence. However, it is also necessary to take into account how hashtag campaigns are not limited to making everyday harms *visible*: they also make them *eventful*, that is, “worthy of documentation, of remembrance, and of public and political discussion” (Thrift 2014:1091). In this sense, the Harvey Weinstein case became a landmark event for the feminist movement as the #MeToo campaign turned it into a reference point for the wider phenomenon of systemic sexual violence (cf. Thrift 2014; Clark 2016).

Another distinctive element of #MeToo is the widespread practice of publicly “naming and shaming” perpetrators, as exemplified explicitly by the French hashtag #BalanceTonPorc that invited women to “expose your pig” (Berndt Rasmussen & Olsson Yaouzis 2020). By 2018, over 400 individuals had reportedly been accused of sexual assault (Green 2018), facing consequences that range from public shaming to being fired to legal sanctions; although many also received solidarity and support against what was perceived as an excessive attack. This focus on offenders has been interpreted as a turning point as it moves the stigma of sexual assault from the victims to the perpetrators; unlike previous high-profile cases of sexual violence, #MeToo survivors were, arguably, more widely believed and supported (Faludi et al. 2020).

This last point is also connected to the concept of “semantic thickness” (Serisier 2018) introduced in the previous chapter: the increased credibility of the women who came forward in #MeToo stems from their large numbers. This applies to the individual men who were accused, who often faced multiple accusations which were thus deemed more believable. On a larger scale, the same concept also applies to the vast number of women who participated in the online campaign. This chorus of voices joining together creates a sense of safety for survivors whose stories are strengthened by the awareness that sexual violence is commonplace and thus not so easily discredited. In this sense #MeToo represented “an act of solidarity with and between survivors

arguably on a scale that has not been witnessed before” (Fileborn & Loney-Howes 2019:5).

In short, as Loney-Howes and Fileborn (2019) summarise,

far from becoming just another hashtag, #MeToo seems to have engrained itself in popular discourse—a shortcut to positioning oneself as a survivor and to act in solidarity with survivors—in a way that previous forms of activism arguably have not. (p. 336)

However, one of the peculiarities of #MeToo is its intrinsic connection to mainstream media from its very start. Other online protests such as #YesAllWomen and #WhyIStayed originated as a response to problematic media reporting, while the digital #MeToo mobilization progressed in synergy with the work of mainstream media, as the movement began after the journalistic investigations on Harvey Weinstein. The close connection between online activism and mainstream media means that it is important to consider #MeToo “not only as a facet of digital feminist activism, but also as an object of mainstream media commentary” with “many competing voices attempting to determine, assert and limit the meanings and significance of the outpouring of evidence of gendered violence and harassment associated with the hashtag” (Boyle 2019:4).

Additionally, it is undeniable that the high visibility of #MeToo in the mainstream is due not only to the large-scale mobilization of social media users, but also to the involvement of celebrities and Hollywood personalities. This often resulted in the obfuscation of systematic sexual violence as the central issue, with media reports paying greater attention to the white celebrities that were involved in such incidents rather than to their call for social change (Clark-Parsons 2019).

## **5. Research objectives**

As the present chapter shows, #MeToo is an interesting phenomenon that can be used as a lens to shed light on the wider societal transformations that were discussed in previous chapters: the role of feminist movements and particularly the challenge they pose to the private/public dichotomy and the role of digital spaces for public sphere

and activism. Additionally, #MeToo is also an extraordinary event that has had a profound cultural impact, and thus deserves to be examined in its own merits.

The main aim of this study, then, is to explore the idea of #MeToo as the latest instance of the wider feminist history of challenging the public-private dichotomy - of making the personal political. Building on the argument by Habermas (1962) and Fraser (1990) that the distinction between public and private matters is decided through discursive contestation by individuals who participate in the public sphere, it is hypothesised that #MeToo functions as a “subaltern counterpublic” (Fraser 1990) aiming to make an intervention in public discussion, and as a form of “discursive activism” (S. Young 1997) seeking to push forward feminist frameworks in mainstream discourse. More specifically, the central practice that is investigated is the use of *public* digital spaces to discuss instances of sexual violence and sexual harassment that have traditionally been considered *private*, with the aim of recasting them as legitimate issues for public discussion. Because of the central role of digital spaces in this practice, an important focus of the study is placed on the forms, content and publics of the #MeToo online protest, and their interplay with offline forces.

In order to address these research questions, I build on the work of feminist and digital media studies that were illustrated in the previous chapters, taking cues from feminist epistemologies (Jaggar 1989; Haraway 1991; Hennessy 1993) to construct the research methodology. The overall purpose of this approach is to keep at the centre of the research methodology two of the main tenets that emerged from the literature review. First,

Feminist epistemologies provide an understanding of subjectivity and agency that supports *an understanding of discursive politics as activism*, and that the capacity to act and notions of individual agency are informed by power relations rather than assumed to be equal and universal. (Shaw 2012c:34, emphasis added)

As was repeatedly stressed in chapter 1, discursive activism constitutes one of the central practices in the feminist movement, and aims to have a political impact on the mainstream public sphere. This is reflected in my research objectives as the main focus is on the role of the #MeToo protests in attempting to shift public opinion on matters of sexual violence and gender inequality. Focusing on discursive feminist

practices allows to posit the conversations that occurred around #MeToo as politically significant and thus a worthy object of research, and to capture their wider political, social and cultural nature and implications.

Second, I also follow recommendations from internet scholars to conceptualise online activity as lived experience (Markham 1998; Baym 2006; Jensen 2011). This stems again from the discussion in chapter 3 on the need to understand online activism not as ancillary to offline politics, but as a form of political activity in itself. This view is therefore also applied to research methods:

[R]eally good internet research, be it qualitative or not, does not really believe in cyberspace in the sense of a distinct place that stands in contrast to the earth-bound world. How online spaces are constructed and the activities that people do online are intimately interwoven with the construction of the offline world and the activities and structures in which we participate, whether we are using the internet or not. Offline contexts always permeate and influence online situations, and online situations and experiences always feed back into offline experience. The best work recognises that the internet is woven into the fabric of the rest of life and seeks to better understand the weaving. (Baym 2006:86)

A central tenet is that the internet provides “new means for understanding the way social realities get constructed and reproduced through discursive behaviours” (Markham 2004:95). In this sense, then, social media are chosen as the site of study because they constitute a “context for social construction” where conversations can be analysed to understand how “language builds and sustains social reality” (Markham 2004:97). Focusing on online conversations therefore allows to explore how individuals make sense of #MeToo as a movement and of the related issues of sexual violence and gender equality, and how these understandings tie in with the broader media and social contexts. The next section explores how Twitter in particular was selected to serve this research purpose.

## **6. Twitter as a research site**

In order to analyse the online #MeToo conversation, Twitter was chosen as the research site due to a number of its characteristics. First, Twitter was one of the central platforms where #MeToo developed, with over 19 million posts in the space of one

year (Anderson & Toor 2018). More than other social networking sites, Twitter is considered “mostly open and public” (Kirkwood et al 2018:2); only around 13% of accounts are set to private<sup>8</sup> (Hughes & Wojcik 2019), meaning that the majority of posts can be seen by anyone – their own followers, other Twitter users, and even individuals who are not registered on the site. Similarly, public posts can receive retweets and replies by any other user, enabling interaction beyond one's circle of friends or followers. In this sense, Twitter places unique “emphasis on accessible dialogic communication in the public domain” (Murthy 2013:9) and favours “interactive multicasting (i.e., the broadcasting of many to many)” (Murthy 2013:6).

The affordances of platforms also influence the type of content that users share. As a microblogging platform, Twitter is characterised by short messages; the initial character limit was 140, later expanded to 280 characters in November 2017, during the period of data collection for this research. This affects the way users engage with the conversation. For example, Manikonda et al. (2018) found significant differences between #MeToo posts shared on Reddit, which contained more in-depth accounts of personal experiences, and Twitter, where posts focused more on pushing #MeToo forward as a movement.

These characteristics all contribute to Twitter being one of the favoured research arenas by media scholars. This is because Twitter conversations are *public* in two main ways. First, because, as explained above, the majority of posts and interactions are publicly accessible, users tend to focus on issues that are also public in their nature. The fascination with thinking of social media as a new public sphere, and the widespread use of Twitter for online activism, has been addressed in chapter 2. Because Twitter is the privileged social networking site for discussing social and political issues, it constitutes “a complex and networked system of social awareness” (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira 2012:268) that incorporates news, entertainment, political information and personal communication. As a result, Twitter represents the best space to understand the political, social and cultural aspects of the #MeToo conversation. By conceiving of Twitter as a digital public sphere, the development of #MeToo activism and related discussion can be closely observed.

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<sup>8</sup> Data for U.S. users.

Doing research with Twitter data offers an unprecedented opportunity to study communicative processes since it is relatively easy to obtain data that is “naturalistic” (Potter and Hepburn 2005), meaning that its construction is unaffected by the data collection process. Twitter research therefore “offers the hitherto unrealisable possibility of studying social processes as they unfold at the level of populations as contrasted with their official construction through the use of ‘terrestrial’ research instruments and curated data-sets” (Edwards et al. 2013:245)

Second, the public nature of Twitter also quickly became appealing to researchers:

Twitter’s (initially) highly accessible Application Programming Interface (API), enabled the development of powerful research methods and the promise of large, sometimes real-time, datasets tracing patterns of user activity around specific themes and topics on the platform, as well as, by proxy, in wider society. (Bruns 2018:1)

Using Twitter as a data source for social research is the subject of increasing scholarly attention, examining the numerous advantages and disadvantages of this approach (e.g. boyd & Crawford 2012; Nagler & Tucker 2015; Bruns 2018). Having such a massive amount of information available for analysis represents attractive for social researchers, as they can have access to data that is usually “freely available, public by default, mainly textual, and easily understandable” (Giglietto et al. 2012:146). This has been described as the “computational turn” towards “big social data” in the social sciences and humanities (Berry 2011). Indeed, Twitter data is mostly publicly available and collectable through its API. However, recent years have seen frequent and more restrictive changes in policies for data access, making it increasingly harder for researchers to obtain Twitter data and casting doubts on the long-term sustainability of this approach. There is also a shift towards increased commercialisation of data access, meaning that big social data are becoming more expensive for researchers. All of these factors entail that Twitter is a “particularly precarious object of, and space for, data-driven research” (Bruns 2018:8), as conditions for data access are constantly changing. This was the case with the present study, which builds on the literature on digital activism that was produced before the 2017 #MeToo movement (see chapter 2). However, in May 2017 Twitter drastically altered its Developer Policy (@andypiper 2017), so that the same methods of data collection used in previous studies could not

be replicated. Taking into account the time and budget restrictions, I concluded that the best course of action for data collection was to employ an already existing dataset. The dataset for the study was therefore obtained from the “Minerva” project, co-financed by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies and the Economia Civile association (see Zacchia, Corsi & Botti 2019). While this approach provided a viable solution to the problem of data access, working on a dataset that was not tailored to the same research objectives created additional limits.

One important issue regards the population that is the subject of the study. The information that social media users provide about themselves is often fragmented and, due to anonymity, unverifiable. As a result, even individual variables that are taken for granted in traditional social research, such as gender and geographical location, may be missing or unreliable. As much attention as possible must thus be paid when processing user-related information to ensure the best possible quality of the data. However, some limits resulting from the anonymity of users are unresolvable, meaning that in this case analysis should focus more on the content of posts rather than their creators. In addition to the problem of reliability, there is the issue of representativeness of the population, which can hinder the generalisability of results.

Finally, using data that was not explicitly supplied by its creators for research purposes raises important ethical considerations. On this matter, the Association of Internet Researchers provides extensive guidelines to ensure that research with internet data is conducted in an ethical and professional manner (franzke et al. 2020). The main issue that poses ethical problems is that of informed consent. This stems again from the blurring of traditional public-private boundaries on social media, since one of the key findings from the AOIR is that

people were sharing more and more information online in what amounted to public or quasi-public fora [...] But they often nonetheless *expected* that these exchanges were somehow private – either individually private or in some form of group privacy. Even though these expectations were not warranted by the technical realities of a given forum or SNS, especially deontological ethics calls for respecting these expectations, and thus protecting these exchanges as anonymous or pseudo-anonymous, and/or requiring informed consent for their use. (franzke et al. 2020:7-8)

Since doing research with big data makes it impossible to obtain first-degree informed consent from each participant, the issue of the *expectations* that users might have of their privacy becomes central. It has already been said that all tweets that were obtained for this study were publicly available. As Townsend & Wallace (2016) note, content can be considered as public if the user can reasonably expect their posts to be observed by strangers. As a result, a double strategy of harm minimisation in relation to privacy was adopted in this study. Tweets are considered “public” when they are highly visible, i.e. they come from accounts of public figures or with a high number of followers, or if they have received a very high number of retweets and thus greater circulation than average. In these cases, it is assumed that the user is aware that their tweets are widely visible, and therefore identifying information such as their username is not removed. On the contrary, tweets with little visibility, i.e. posted by “common” users and with few or no retweets, are not considered public, and therefore they are anonymised in the discussion. This strategy was deemed particularly necessary because of the sensitive nature of the topic of this study, as I expected that many users would discuss episodes of sexual violence, sometimes drawing from their personal experience (Mukherjee 2017).

## **7. Dataset and research design**

The dataset for the study was offered by the “Minerva” project, co-financed by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies and the Economia Civile association (see Zacchia, Corsi & Botti 2019). Using a Python-built API, researchers collected public Twitter posts generated between October 2017 and April 2018 that contained the #MeToo hashtag and a selection of local hashtags: #balancetonporc for France; #quellavoltache for Italy; #yotambien, developed a few days after #MeToo by Spanish speakers; #sistabriefen, created in Sweden in November 2017; and #12odb, created in Germany in January 2018.

The last two hashtags represent peculiar cases. In Sweden, #MeToo took on a particular form because a large number of industry-specific campaigns were created (Johansson, Johansson & Andersson 2018); Pollack (2019) counts as many as 65 different initiatives from various industries launched between October 2017 and

March 2018. #sistabriefen (“the last brief”) represents one of these many initiatives that was launched by the PR & communication industry.

The German hashtag #120db (“120 decibels”, the standard frequency of personal alarms) is connected to a politically controversial campaign focusing on crimes by migrants. The hashtag was launched in January 2018 by Martin Sellner, a key figure of the Austrian right-wing Identitären group with connections to the German alt-right. The campaign builds on the international #MeToo moment to “give voice to 'neglected' sexual violence cases committed by migrants and refugees” in Europe and to compare “the lack of media attention to European victims of migrant predators to the lack of attention to the deeply rooted, pervasive fabric of sexual harassment culture in general” (Sorice 2018:1124-1125). This campaign has been interpreted as a “hijacking” of #MeToo by the far right (Knüpfer, Hoffmann & Voskresenskii 2020). Even though this hashtag has mostly been used with a different meaning than the original #MeToo movement, these “deviant” cases have been included in the analysis to give a complete overview of the development of the movement<sup>9</sup>.

The initial dataset consisted of 2.174.787 posts generated by 1.203.564 Twitter users (Table 1). For each tweet, the following information was included: timestamp, ID, language, username, text, number of retweets, number of favourites, hashtags, mentions and permalink.

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<sup>9</sup> Knüpfer, Hoffmann & Voskresenskii (2020) provide an in-depth exploration of the specific case of the #120db hashtag.

Hashtag	Posts <sup>10</sup>	% posts	Users	% users <sup>11</sup>
#MeToo	2,048,092	94	84,229	93.58
#balancetonporc	114,283	5.2	49,183	5.43
#120db	30,465	1.4	6,713	0.74
#yotambien	7,237	0.3	4,965	0.55
#sistabriefen	336	0.02	149	0.02
#quellavoltache	9,048	0.4	3,831	0.42
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,178,996</b>		<b>905,357</b>	

Table 1. Number of posts and users in initial dataset by hashtag.

The initial dataset obtained for the study comprised of 2,174,787 tweets; after cleaning the data<sup>12</sup>, 2,163,102 tweets remained. Tweets were written in 51 languages; the vast majority are in English (78.6%) while other languages make up smaller percentages (around 5% or less, see Table 2).

<sup>10</sup> Total is higher than the number of collected posts since some tweets contain more than one hashtag.

<sup>11</sup> Total is higher than 100% since some tweets contain more than one hashtag.

<sup>12</sup> Duplicate tweets and tweets containing corrupted characters were removed. Tweets containing the #MeToo hashtag but posted before Alyssa Milano's 15 October 2017 tweet were also removed as they were deemed irrelevant, since they were referring to something other than the #MeToo movement.

Language	Frequency	% of total tweets
English	1,696,731	78.6%
French	115,987	5.4%
Japanese	61,89	2.9%
German	52,987	2.5%
Spanish	43,903	2.0%
Dutch	39,186	1.8%
Swedish	37,682	1.7%
Italian	17,672	0.8%
Korean	12,892	0.6%
Norwegian	11,752	0.5%
Other languages	72,42	3.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,163,102</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Table 2. Languages in the dataset.*

Because texts need to be standardised to be analysed by software (e.g. SPSS), only 8 languages were selected from the top 10 most frequent languages in the dataset: English, French, German, Spanish, Dutch, Swedish, Italian and Norwegian; Japanese and Korean tweets were removed due to different character sets. The remaining number of tweets in the dataset after this selection is 2,015,900, 93.2% of the initial dataset.

Given the large quantity of information that is obtainable from social media, working with this kind of data has been described as “a methodologically challenging endeavor” (Sudulich et al. 2014:1). Importantly, it has been argued that the complexity of social phenomena cannot be captured or interpreted with the use of big data alone (Di Giammaria & Faggiano 2016, 2017). Similarly, Bruns (2018) warns against doing research with big data alone, since this often results in a mere descriptive overview of basic metrics of social media participation. Instead, he suggests that a more meaningful approach is to integrate quantitative and qualitative methods: “the

computational, quantitative evaluation of very large datasets may be utilised for instance to pinpoint specific subsets of the data that are then subjected to further qualitative analysis in the form of a close reading of tweets” (Bruns 2018:9). This approach can be understood as an invitation to mixed methods research, if one adopts some of the broader definitions of mixed methods that have emerged in recent years (Creswell 2011). For example, Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) have defined mixed methods as

A research design with philosophical assumptions as well as methods of inquiry. As a methodology, it involves philosophical assumptions that guide the direction of the collection and analysis and the mixture of qualitative and quantitative approaches in many phases of the research process. As a method, it focuses on collecting, analyzing, and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or series of studies. Its central premise is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches, in combination, provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone. (p. 5)

Similarly, Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner (2007) combine 19 definitions of mixed methods provided by other highly published scholars into a wider composite definition:

Mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the purpose of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration. (p. 123)

In this sense, then, mixed methods is broadly understood as a methodological approach that combines qualitative and quantitative research to allow an in-depth exploration of a research problem. Building on this suggestion, I adopt an integrated approach combining quantitative and qualitative analysis, which are employed sequentially, to investigate different dimensions of the #MeToo conversation on Twitter. The research design is therefore articulated into two main stages.

The first stage of the research consists of the quantitative approach, which has the aim of describing the phenomenon by giving a broader picture of the major themes and trends emerging from the first six months of the #MeToo conversation on Twitter.

This stage serves to “preliminarily identify previously unknown or merely suspected patterns in communicative behaviour which can then be subjected to further rigorous analysis” (Bruns 2018:10) in the second stage of the study. One of the objectives is therefore to narrow down some key concepts that characterise #MeToo and that can help guide the analysis in the second stage of the research. In this stage, the data and metadata available for the tweets are therefore analysed to identify the main communicative patterns in the six-month period of the #MeToo conversation. Using SPSS and Excel as the principal software for quantitative analysis, I analysed the entire dataset to obtain metrics on temporal patterns across the dataset and on user behaviour and participation in the conversation (Bruns & Stieglitz 2012; Bruns 2018). This approach also has the useful purpose of organising the data; as will be shown in the next chapter, activity peaks and lulls in the Twitter conversation constitute handy reference points to help make sense of the extensive dataset, thus offsetting some of the methodological and practical challenges of working with big data. The results from this stage of the research are presented and discussed in chapter 4.

The second stage of the research consists in the qualitative approach and has the scope of engaging more closely with the data, providing more nuanced interpretation. More specifically, on the basis of the results from the first research stage, I selected two particular case studies within the wider #MeToo movement for in-depth analysis.

Within the qualitative stage, the first case study is the Twitter discussion that followed the publication of a story on the website Babe.net, detailing allegations of sexual misconduct against actor Aziz Ansari (Way 2018). The discussion that followed the story was deemed interesting for analysis because this case deviated in important ways from the #MeToo “media template” that had been constructed thus far. The majority of #MeToo cases had featured sexual harassment or assault in work environments, perpetrated by men in powerful positions who could coerce and silence their victims, often with the complicity of others in their industry (Salter 2019:318). While it involved allegations against a famous man in a public forum, this case was different because the two individuals had no professional relation, Ansari held no formal power over the woman, and his actions did not classify as sexual assault or harassment in criminal law definitions. As the article was published shortly after the

Weinstein scandal, the incident was framed by the media as part of a wider #MeToo reckoning, and managed to spark a debate on the role of consent in everyday settings and on the boundaries of what constitutes sexual violence.

The second case analysed is the Twitter discussion of an open letter signed by over 100 renowned French women and published by *Le Monde* (Chiche et al. 2018). The authors of the letter openly criticise #MeToo and “this feminism that, beyond the denunciation of abuses of power, takes the face of a hatred of men and sexuality” (Chiche et al. 2018). This case was selected for analysis because the letter represents the most explicit and public criticism of #MeToo that took place in the first six months of the movement. While several individuals had already expressed their aversion to #MeToo, the *Le Monde* letter was the most structured and articulate initiative. As such, it also provoked an interesting discussion on social media, as some felt that the letter voiced the concerns that many had toward #MeToo, while others felt it was utterly misguided.

Both of the events selected took place in January 2018, the period of highest Twitter activity in the sample. The *Le Monde* letter was actually published first, on 9 January, while the Babe.net story followed a few days later, on 13 January. However, the two cases are here analysed in non-chronological order because many of the issues that emerge from the Babe.net discussion are articulated in the *Le Monde* letter; the latter can therefore be read as embodying much of the discussion that was directed at #MeToo cases such as the former.

The reaction to the Babe.net story has proven especially interesting, as testified by the significant number of studies that have been published on this case (Hänel 2018; Hinds & Fileborn 2019; Na 2019; Clausen 2020; Dubrofsky & Levina 2020; Worthington 2020), which the present analysis builds on. The *Le Monde* letter has been explored less systematically in the literature (see Boyle 2019:30-40; de Villeneuve 2019; Fileborn & Phillips 2019:106-118). It was nonetheless deemed deserving of in-depth analysis because it represents one of the most explicit instances of backlash against #MeToo, and one of the few cases where a Europe-based incident made international news and was picked up globally.

In order to analyse the Twitter conversations on each case, I constructed two sub-samples from the main dataset. For the Babe.net story, I extracted all tweets containing the key word “Ansari” from the dataset over the entire period. This generated an initial sample of 9,835 tweets. In order to obtain a more manageable size for close reading, I extracted a random 10% sample of tweets; additionally, all tweets with duplicate text were eliminated<sup>13</sup>. The final sample consists of 979 tweets.

Because the Le Monde letter was not focused on a single individual, the construction of the sample for this case required a slightly more complex approach. I extracted an initial sample of tweets containing the following key words: “Deneuve”, “French”, “Monde”. Because these key words were more generic, the sample was limited to the time period of one week, from 9 to 15 January 2018. Additionally, all tweets written in French from that time period were extracted, since it was assumed that the majority of discussion in that language would be focused on the Le Monde letter. This generated an initial sample of 13,226 tweets. In order to obtain a sample that was in comparable to the first one, I extracted a random sample of 14% tweets, generating a final sample of 1,434 tweets<sup>14</sup>.

Both sets of tweets were analysed using thematic analysis, defined as “a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke 2006:9). The goal of thematic analysis is to highlight “the most salient constellations of meanings present in the dataset” including “affective, cognitive and symbolic dimensions” (Joffe 2012:209). This method is deemed particularly useful to understand how the process of social construction of a certain issue by given population – in this case, how Twitter users conceptualise #MeToo and sexual violence. Additionally, thematic analysis has the advantage of combining deductive and abductive approaches to data analysis. The researcher must refer to their existing theoretical framework in order to identify conceptual patterns in the data; at the same time, they must remain open to finding new concepts that can innovate the existing

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<sup>13</sup> This includes retweets with no additional text by the user.

<sup>14</sup> This is a slightly higher number than the first sample because the Le Monde sample has a larger share of tweets that only report the news of the controversy, rather than commenting on it, thus providing fewer posts for meaningful content analysis.

body of knowledge (Joffe 2012). In this sense, the researcher takes on an “active role” in “identifying patterns/themes, selecting which are of interest, and reporting them to the readers” (Braun & Clarke 2006:7). I read both samples of tweets repeatedly to identify initial codes, which were annotated with the aid of Dedoose software. I then sorted recurring codes into overarching themes, creating two sets of themes for each sample of tweets.

From the initial readings of the two sets of tweets, it became immediately apparent that the debate was deeply intertwined with news media reports and opinion pieces on the two cases, which were often quoted in the Twitter discussion. As a result, I identified the most shared articles (linked more than five times) for each sample and read them to better understand the unfolding of the Twitter discussion. Excerpts from these articles are therefore included throughout the discussion of findings, in cases where these references are needed to clarify the meaning of the conversation among Twitter users. The articles are summarised in tables 3 and 4.

The results from thematic analysis are presented in chapter 5 for the Aziz Ansari case and chapter 6 for the Le Monde case.

The most interesting and striking results from both stages of the research are then brought together and provide the basis for a wider discussion of the main themes, illustrated in chapter 7.

Date	Author	Title	Website	Twitter shares
15 January	Bari Weiss	Aziz Ansari Is Guilty. Of Not Being a Mind Reader	New York Times	21
15 January	Caitlin Flanagan	The Humiliation of Aziz Ansari	The Atlantic	20
16 January	Osita Nwanevu	There Is No Rampaging #MeToo Mob	Slate	8
16 January	Anna Silman	Aziz Ansari, ‘Cat Person,’ and the #MeToo Backlash	The Cut	7
17 January	Rebecca Ruiz	Talking about #MeToo on social media is hard, but we shouldn't stop trying	Mashable	6
17 January	Lindy West	Aziz, We Tried to Warn You	New York Times	6
22 January	Sarah Solemani	The Aziz Ansari furore isn’t the end of #MeToo. It’s just the start	The Guardian	10

Table 3. Most shared articles on the Aziz Ansari case.

Date	Author	Title	Website	Twitter shares
9 January	Rachel Donadio	France, Where #MeToo Becomes #PasMoi	The Atlantic	6
10 January	Lauren Collins	Why Did Catherine Deneuve and Other Prominent French Women Denounce #MeToo?	The New Yorker	23
10 January	Van Badham	Catherine Deneuve, let me explain why #metoo is nothing like a witch-hunt	The Guardian	6
12 January	Rosie DiManno	Three cheers to the ballsy French women who called out the fury of the #MeToo phenomenon	The Star	6
12 January	Agnès C. Poirier	Catherine Deneuve and the French Feminist Difference	New York Times	10
12 January	Aurelien Breeden and Elian Peltier	Response to French Letter Denouncing #MeToo Shows a Sharp Divide	New York Times	7
13 January	Laura Kipnis	Has #MeToo gone too far, or not far enough? The answer is both	The Guardian	6
15 January	unknown	"I don't like this pack mentality": Catherine Deneuve clarifies her views on #MeToo movement following criticism for 'defending men'	Daily Mail	5
15 January	Igor Ogorodnev	French women are brave to speak up for sex, but their #MeToo opponents want power, not pleasure	RT	7

Table 4. Most shared articles on the *Le Monde* case.

## 8. Limitations of the dataset

Limitations of the dataset stem from two main sources: the general limits of “Twitter research” and the specific limits that affect the present study.

A critical overview discussing the strengths and weaknesses of doing research using Twitter as a data source was already introduced in section 6 of this chapter. More specifically, this study falls under the category of “hashtag studies”, as the main dataset was constructed by collecting tweets that included a specific thematic hashtag. The overreliance on hashtag-based data collection that characterised earlier social media studies has more recently been criticised by Bruns (2020), who notes that

such datasets necessarily cover only a self-selecting subset of all Twitter uses relating to the same events: they include only those tweets which their authors chose to mark as relevant to the topic, by including one particular hashtag. Exchanges using competing or complementary hashtags, or topically relevant but non-hashtagged conversations, remain excluded from these datasets. (p. 5)

This limit is less pronounced in the case of #MeToo, given that it is not merely a thematic hashtag, but the hashtagged phrase became a shorthand for a wider movement and discussion on sexual violence. For example, Bruns & Stieglitz (2014) report that during the 2011 tsunami in Japan, Twitter users were four times more likely to use only the word “tsunami” rather than “#tsunami”. This is not the case with #MeToo, which almost always includes the hashtag in all public conversations on social as well as other media. Still, basing the selection of tweets to include in the dataset on one hashtag alone means that a significant part of tweets making up the conversations are left out. Most notably, @replies to a hashtagged tweet contribute to the overall conversation, but if the poster does not repeat the hashtag – which they may deem redundant – the @reply tweet will not be included in the dataset. More generally, a user discussing the topic at hand may not include a hashtag because the content of the post is perceived as sufficient for others to infer what the tweet is referencing. This is the case, for example, of Donald Trump in the present dataset, who never used the hashtag #MeToo but nevertheless made a number of relevant posts that signal his participation in the conversation. On the other hand, given #MeToo’s extensive reach over different themes during a long period of time, users also created additional hashtags to discuss “sub-topics” that emerged within the wider umbrella of #MeToo<sup>15</sup>. For example, it is likely that many users talked about the Babe.net story using the topical hashtag #AzizAnsari and forfeiting the #MeToo hashtag. As a result, despite their significant interest for the present study, these types of tweets were not included in the dataset and are not part of the analysis.

A second set of limitations is caused by the decision to employ a dataset that was originally constructed for a different research project. The original Minerva project

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, the #HimToo hashtag used to refute the accusations against Judge Brett Kavanaugh (Boyle & Rathnayake 2019).

had the main objective of carrying out textual analysis on the tweets. The resulting dataset reflects this priority as most of the information included is textual. The dataset also provides some additional information that was produced by the data collectors, such as language of the tweet, which was extracted through a machine learning process by the researchers. However, some other types of metadata that are usually included in Twitter dataset are not present, since they were deemed irrelevant for the scope of the original Minerva research. For example, it is not clearly stated whether each tweet constitutes an original post, a retweet or a reply to another tweet. The only available information is the number of retweets for each tweet and the mentions included in the tweet text. This excludes the possibility of certain research approaches, such as social network analysis, because of the lack of data to reconstruct network structures. Similarly, multimedia objects that are sometimes attached to a tweet – such as photos, videos or animated gifs – are not clearly indicated, requiring a manual check of each link to verify if these additional elements are present in the original tweet. An additional limit is the lack of geographical information for users. Although less than 1% of tweets are geo-tagged (Graham, Hale & Gaffney 2014), other information such as time zones can be used as a proxy to infer a user's location (Schulz et al. 2013). This leaves only two main types of information to be used as a proxy to contextualise tweets: language and type of hashtag used (“international” #MeToo or a national hashtag). This represents a severe limit as a large quantity of the tweets are analysed with little or no regard to the geographical and cultural context where they were produced.

The research design was therefore conceived keeping these limits of the dataset in mind. The quantitative stage was carried out analysing the available data and metadata for the tweets to obtain basic metrics. The greater space accorded to the qualitative stage is also a product of these limitations, since the nature of the dataset is more suited to text analysis. The final research design works around these constraints to engage with the dataset in a manner that still allows to fully achieve the research objectives.

## Chapter 4

### Main trends in the #MeToo conversation

This chapter explores the main trends that emerge from quantitative analysis of #MeToo on Twitter, based on a number of key activity metrics (Bruns & Stieglitz 2012; Bruns 2020). The first section looks at temporal metrics to understand how #MeToo developed over time, from its start and over the course of its first six months, and how user activity varied. The second section is concerned with user participation and visibility: who participated in the conversation and whose posts gained the most attention. The third section explores how users created or sought out new elements to add to the conversation, such as including URLs linking outside of Twitter and hashtags other than #MeToo. The final section proposes some initial reflections on the basis of these metrics, focusing especially on understanding the characteristics of the #MeToo Twitter public and on its cultural and political relevance.

#### 1. How #MeToo developed: temporal metrics

As anticipated in the previous chapter, the movement began with the Italian hashtag #quellavoltache, followed by the French #balancetonporc; this is reflected in Fig. 1 which shows early activity from these countries before Alyssa Milano's initial tweet<sup>16</sup>. After Milano's post, which appeared on the evening of 15 October 2017, #MeToo quickly took over as the main hashtag used worldwide, as shown by the sudden spike in tweets in Fig. 2.

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<sup>16</sup> The other hashtags in the dataset (#yotambien, #sistabriefen and #12odb) are not shown in this figure since they were created at a later date (cf. chapter 3).

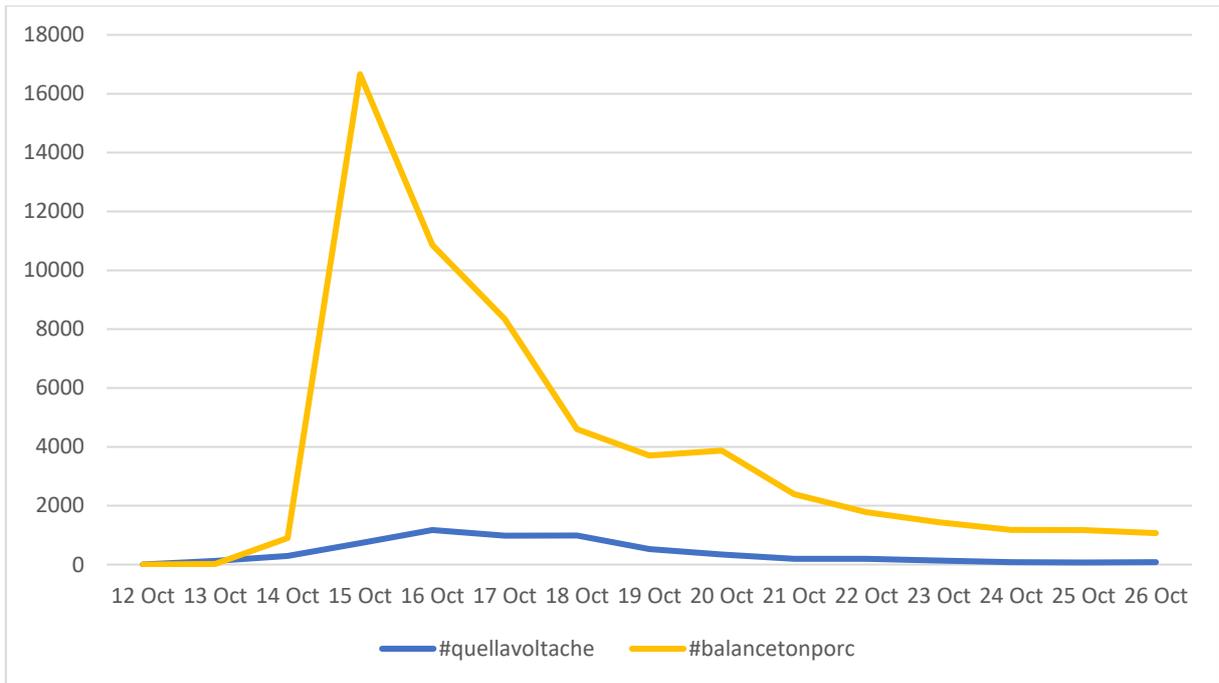


Figure 1. Distribution of tweets with the Italian and French hashtags in the first two weeks.

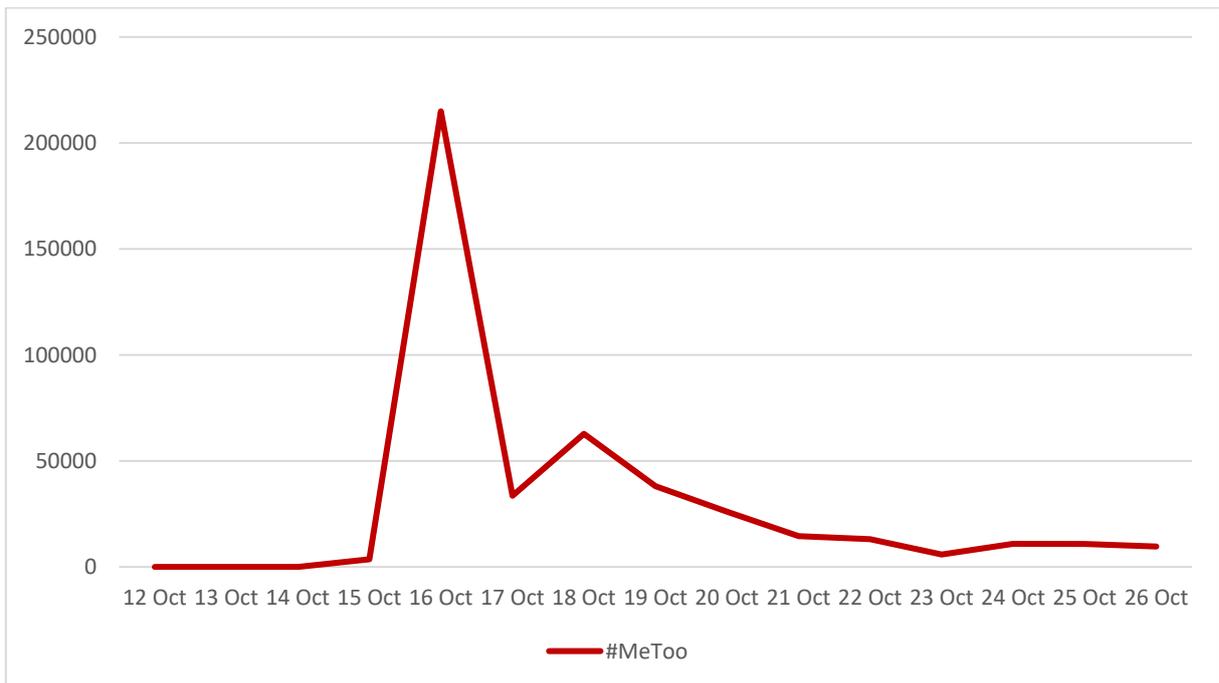


Figure 2. Distribution of tweets with the #MeToo hashtag in the first two weeks.

Looking at the temporal distribution of all tweets over the entire six-month period (October 2017 – April 2018), clear patterns of activity emerge, alternating peaks and lulls in user activity (Fig. 3).

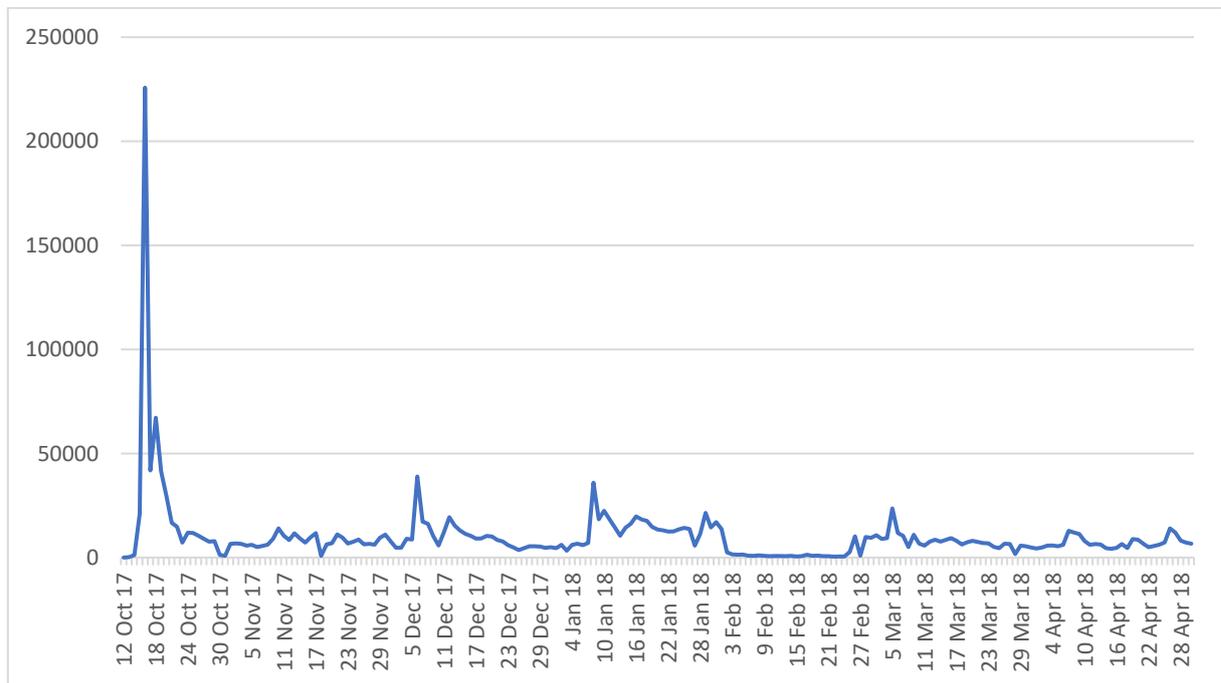


Figure 3. Overall distribution of all tweets in the entire period (October 2017 – April 2018).

The most notable peak coincides with the initial diffusion of the #MeToo hashtag, with 24.8% of total tweets produced in the first nine days since Alyssa Milano's tweet (15-26 October 2017); 12.3% of all tweets were posted on one day alone, 16 October 2017, the first day after Milano's tweet.

In addition to initial activity, a number of peaks emerge at different times throughout the six-month period. The trajectory of the hashtag on social media represents one of the peculiarities of #MeToo, as observed by Clark-Parsons:

while most hashtags follow a single spike pattern, peaking, and then fading in popularity over a period of days or weeks, #MeToo has followed a multi-spike pattern, rising and falling and rising again as new allegations of sexual violence became public or new editorial pieces on the movement went viral. (Clark-Parsons 2019:6)

Importantly, all of the peaks in the dataset coincide with major media moments. The inextricability of social media activism and mainstream media commentary in #MeToo has been discussed in chapter 3, and is reflected in the interrelatedness between Twitter activity and media events (Clark-Parsons 2019; De Benedictis et al.

2019). Because the vast number of tweets included in the dataset and the long time period considered mean that it is difficult to isolate the single events that may have contributed to increased user activity. As a result, whenever peaks appear in the distribution, potentially significant media events were sought in the literature for each of the relevant dates in order to identify the causes of increased activity (Boyle 2019; De Benedictis et al. 2019; Fileborn & Loney-Howes 2019). Peaks are defined as a significant rise in the number of tweets produced each day compared to the average in the entire dataset. From this analysis, ten peaks in Twitter activity can be identified, as illustrated in table 5.

Peak	Date	Event	Average peak in Twitter activity
1	16–22 October 2017	#MeToo kicks off	+2.6%
2	10 November 2017	Accusations against Roy Moore and Louis C.K.	+0,2%
3	13 November 2017	March in California	+0.1%
4	17 November 2017	Accusations against Al Franken	+0.1%
5	6–8 December 2017	Time magazine cover	+0.8%
6	11–16 December 2017	Accusations against Mario Batali and Weinstein; Roy Moore defeated	+0.25%
7	8 January – 1 February 2018	Golden Globes; Le Monde letter; new accusations	+0.3%
8	5–6 March 2018	Oscars ceremony	+0.45%
9	7–9 April 2018	Tony Robbins' viral video and apology	+0.1%
10	26 April 2018	Bill Cosby's guilty verdict	+0.2%

*Table 5. Peaks in #MeToo activity.*

As anticipated, the first peak occurs immediately after Alyssa Milano's initial #MeToo tweet and the subsequent discussion and disclosure of more cases of sexual assault and harassment. In November 2017, public accusations against famous men - politicians Roy Moore and Al Franken, comedian Louis C.K. - result in one-day spikes in activity, in addition to a “#MeToo march” held in Los Angeles on 12 November. In early December 2017, Time Magazine names the #MeToo “Silence Breakers” as their “Person of the Year” (Zacharek, Dockterman & Sweetland Edwards 2017). The second peak that occurs in December is due to the combination of various events, such as the

accusations of sexual assault against celebrity chef Mario Batali, new accusations against Weinstein by actress Salma Hayek, and the defeat of Roy Moore in the Alabama elections.

The most prolonged peak takes place over the course of three weeks in January 2018, due to a number of overlapping events that reignited the wider debate on #MeToo. These include the Golden Globes, where attendees wore black in support of the Time's Up movement and #MeToo pins, and where Oprah Winfrey gave a potent speech; the letter published in *Le Monde* denouncing #MeToo; and new accusations of sexual abuse against powerful men, such as Woody Allen.

In April 2018, the first peak mostly concerns a viral video of motivational speaker Tony Robbins making belittling comments about #MeToo victims, and his subsequent apology. The final peak on 26 April 2018 coincides with the date of the verdict on Bill Cosby's trial, where he was found guilty of sexual assault, and which was widely perceived to have been influenced by the #MeToo cultural shift.

On the one hand, this pattern in activity is comparable to metrics from different types of events on Twitter, such as elections (Aragón et al. 2013) or demonstrations (Jackson & Foucault Welles 2016; Belotti, Comunello & Corradi 2020). In these cases, users respond to breaking news, media events or offline activity with higher volumes of engagement. This is especially useful to explain peaks corresponding to Hollywood media events such as award shows. In 2018, these events had a specific focus on #MeToo, with celebrities discussing gender inequality in their speeches, or taking a symbolic stand through dress code<sup>17</sup>. In this sense, these events constitute part of the #MeToo movement, and also triggered higher participation on social media as users commented on the shows.

An even more fitting case of this mutually reinforcing logic between social media and offline events are the many accusations against famous men. The long-lasting impact of the initial Weinstein investigation brought to more public accusations against

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<sup>17</sup> Actresses wore all-black dresses to the 2018 Golden Globes ceremony to protest sexual harassment and raise awareness for Time's Up. Additionally, many celebrities sported a "Time's up" pin to the Golden Globes and Oscars ceremonies.

notable men, which were widely discussed on social media in controversial tones. As MacKinnon points out, one of the most remarkable features of #MeToo that sets it apart from previous anti-violence activism has to do precisely with this controversy around accused men, as companies “come to the very swift conclusion [...] that they can’t afford to keep these men around or be associated with them or their work product” (MacKinnon & Mitra 2019:1031).

In this sense, it is useful to compare these results with analysis of news media reports of #MeToo, in order to understand how different types of information circulate on different media, specifically how content that was shared on social media differs from what was reported in news media. On the one hand, these Twitter peaks confirm the same patterns that were identified by De Benedictis et al. (2019), who found that in UK press coverage of #MeToo, all peaks “revolve around key media events” characterised by three central and interrelated themes: “feminist protest, sexual violence and celebrity culture” (p. 12). These are broadly the same themes that also emerge from the Twitter conversation. In a similar analysis of U.S. news coverage of #MeToo, Ghosh et al. (2020) found that news media outlets tended to focus on celebrities and on accused politicians, but they contend that this represents a departure from social media activity, which focused more on sharing personal stories and expressing support for #MeToo victims. On this point, they highlight “a gap between the coverage of prominent news media and the interests of the public” given that “the national conversation taking place online bore little resemblance to the one in prominent news media” (Ghosh et al. 2020:22-23).

## **2. Participation and visibility: users and retweets**

The total number of unique users in the dataset is 830,942. This means that each user produced on average 2.42 tweets. The top 10 most active users created around 1.4% of all tweets in the dataset; among these, the single most active account produced 13,728 tweets, while the remaining 9 authored around 1,563 tweets on average. These activity patterns are similar to the “long-tailed” distribution found by Olteanu, Weber and Gatica-Perez (2016) in their analysis of the demographics of #BlackLivesMatter,

meaning that the majority of users only contribute with a small number of tweets to the dataset, while only a few users post in the order of thousands of tweets.

Given the average activity patterns in the dataset, it is noticeable that the level of activity of the most prolific accounts seems to suggest that some degree of automation in posting tweets is present. This is not surprising since it has been estimated that up to 15% of Twitter accounts might be bots (Varol et al. 2017). Research on bots is still limited given the recency of the phenomenon, but fast growing given their prominent role in online spaces; the majority of attention has come from the field of politics and journalism, since bots can often be used with malicious intents, such as spreading misinformation and “fake news” (e.g. Larsson & Hallvard 2015; Bessi & Ferrara 2016; Stieglitz et al. 2017; Keller & Klinger 2019). Social bots can be broadly defined as “social media accounts controlled in part by software” (Yang et al. 2020:1096); identifying an account as a social bot can be extremely difficult.

The most active users in the dataset were analysed with the help of Botometer, a popular bot detection tool that assigns a range of scores on a 0-to-5 scale to each account, with zero being most human-like and five being the most bot-like<sup>18</sup>. However, the results of this analysis were mostly inconclusive, given the difficulties in providing a univocal classification and the fact that “the boundary between human-like and bot-like behavior is now fuzzier” than ever (Ferrara et al. 2016:99). For the purposes of the present research, it was decided not to delete any of the tweets generated by possibly (partly) automated accounts. This is due to the demonstrated impossibility of telling “authentic” and “inauthentic” accounts apart. Additionally, recent literature has underlined the importance of considering bot activity as a form of public sphere intervention, since they are designed to make a contribution to online conversations (Ausserhofer & Maireder 2013; Woolley 2016; Holmes & Lussos 2018). For example, the fourth most active user in the dataset is @evry2min, an account that describes itself as “creat[ing] technology to combat sexual violence & change the culture on college campuses”. It is understandable that a technology company would

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<sup>18</sup> Botometer is a project of the Observatory on Social Media at Indiana University, available at <https://botometer.osome.iu.edu/>

use software to post consistent updates to their Twitter account; at the same time, given their mission, their contributions to #MeToo should not be disregarded<sup>19</sup>.

User mentions, on the other hand, constitute a useful and more reliable metric to better understand the roles different users assume in the dataset: “Users who receive many @mentions, but rarely @reply in return, must be seen mainly as subjects of conversation; users who both receive and send @replies frequently, by contrast, are active subjects *within* conversation” (Bruns & Stieglitz 2014:73). 20.4% of tweets in the dataset contain one or more user mentions; 69% of tweets have only one mention while the remaining 31% include between 2 and 60 mentions. Table 6 compares the top 20 users who received the most mentions with the number of #MeToo tweets they posted, in order to understand the ratio of “subjects of conversation” vs. active participation.

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<sup>19</sup> The first most active and most “suspicious” account, @raulorozco, could not be analysed on Botometer because the profile is no longer active in 2020. However, upon closer inspection, posts from this account only included a series of hashtags that varied daily. This means that the profile made no significant contributions in terms of new content to the dataset as it did not generate original texts; the hashtags, on the other hand, contributed to the mass of trending topics on Twitter and therefore cannot be disregarded. Overall, then, the inclusion of this account within the dataset does not interfere with the analysis.

	User	Percent of total mentions	#MeToo posts	Type of user
1	youtube	3.9	0	Digital platform
2	realdonaldtrump / potus <sup>20</sup>	3.3	0	Political actor
3	time	1.3	71	News outlet
4	oprah	1.3	0	Celebrity
5	alyssa_milano	1	134	Celebrity
6	taranaburke	1	56	Political actor
7	tonyrobbins	1	0	Celebrity
8	nytimes	0.9	74	News outlet
9	alfranken / senfranken <sup>21</sup>	0.7	1	Political actor
10	rosemcgowan	0.7	18	Celebrity
11	cnn	0.6	82	News outlet
12	gop	0.6	0	Political organisation
13	hillaryclinton	0.4	0	Political actor
14	sengillibrand	0.4	9	Political actor
15	jimmykimmel	0.3	0	Celebrity
16	thedailybeast	0.3	153	News outlet
17	foxnews	0.3	41	News outlet
18	womensmarch	0.3	18	Political organisation
19	asiaargento	0.3	75	Celebrity
20	kesharose	0.3	0	Celebrity

Table 6. Top 20 most mentioned users<sup>22</sup> vs. number of #MeToo tweets they posted.

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realdonald

<sup>20</sup> @realdonaldtrump is mentioned 11,292 times (2.7%) and @potus 2,458 times (0.6%).

alfranken

<sup>21</sup> @alfranken is mentioned 1,519 times (0.4%) and @senfranken 1,406 (0.3%). The #MeToo tweet was posted by @senfranken.

<sup>22</sup> Indication based only on the first mention in the tweet, not all mentions in all tweets. The variable mention<sub>1</sub> includes 411,701 users. Given that two individuals in the top 20 mentions have two accounts (Donald Trump's @realdonaldtrump and @potus; Al Franken's @alfranken and @senfranken), data for the respective accounts are added up and counted as one.

The data in table 6 reveal some interesting insights into the users who are at the centre of conversation, showing a combination of Hollywood individuals, media outlets reporting on #MeToo and political figures. With the exception of Asia Argento, all users are U.S.-based individuals or organisations. The first most mentioned account is @YouTube; this is simply due to the fact that, when sharing a video from Youtube to Twitter, the mention is automatically included in the tweet.

The role of show business in inciting conversation is evident, as the list includes some of the actresses who most vocally spoke out about #MeToo (Alyssa Milano, Rose McGowan, Asia Argento), as well as television hosts Oprah Winfrey and Jimmy Kimmel who addressed #MeToo in their speeches at the 2018 Golden Globes and Oscars ceremonies.

A number of U.S. politicians also appear, with President Trump the most discussed individual. Another political controversy emerges with the presence of Al Franken, a Minnesota Senator who resigned after being accused of sexual misconduct, and Kirsten Gillibrand, the so-called “#MeToo senator” (Siddiqui 2019) who was especially outspoken against Franken.

As expected, the role of mainstream media is also prominent. Time Magazine and the New York Times are the two most mentioned news outlets, given their significance in propelling and publicising #MeToo stories.

It is also observable how, as Bruns & Stieglitz (2013) suggest, some actors are only part of the debate as topics of conversation, but do not take on an active role. This is most evident in the case of Donald Trump, who is the individual most often mentioned in the whole dataset but who has never tweeted using #MeToo or related hashtags<sup>23</sup>. Similarly, celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey and Tony Robbins were discussed because of comments on they made publicly, but they did not personally take part in the #MeToo conversation Twitter.

The centrality of well-known individuals and organisations in the #MeToo conversation is also confirmed by looking at the 100 users who received the most

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<sup>23</sup> This does not mean that these individuals did not participate in the wider Twitter conversation on #MeToo; see section 8 in the previous chapter.

mentions (Fig. 4). The chart mostly reflects the same trends as the top 20 most mentioned users, with the addition of a slightly larger role for the accounts of digital platforms (such as social networking sites, Netflix and Amazon) and journalists and writers. It is significant that neither Twitter influencers nor “common” users appear among the top mentions; while common users contributed to a vast majority of the tweets in the dataset, their influence was not sufficient to overshadow the fame of figures from entertainment, politics and the media. This confirms the argument by Poell & Van Dijck (2016) who underline how the common assumption that social platforms “facilitate horizontal activist networks” is often unfounded; in this respect, social media tend to follow a similar logic to traditional mass media in enhancing “the visibility of particular actors and topics” (p. 230). This point is further discussed in section 4 of this chapter.

Metrics on mentions are especially revealing of the centrality of U.S. politics in #MeToo (see discussion in section 5 of this chapter). Among the top 100 mentioned users, the highest share of mentions refers to the category of political actors or organisations (30%, fig. 4), calling 25 unique users into the discussion.

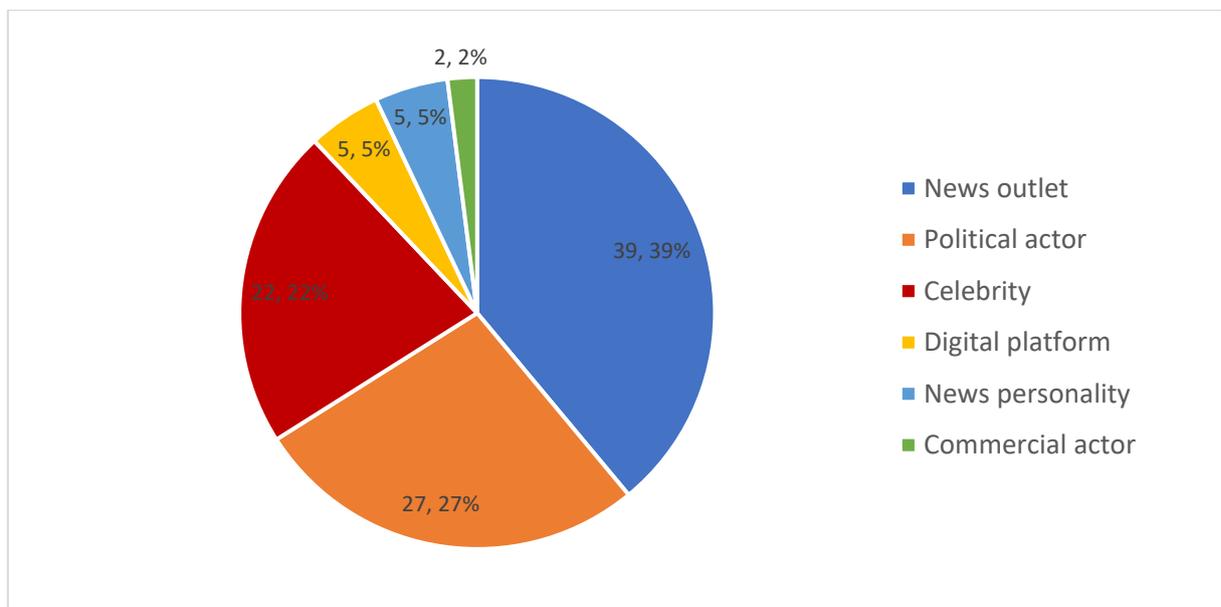


Figure 4. Type of user for the 100 most mentioned users.

Retweets are also a useful metric to understand the role of posts and users in the conversation. Overall, in the dataset, 77.3% of tweets have 0 retweets and 20.2% of tweets have between 1 and 10 retweets. Only 0.3% of posts have more than 100 retweets and 0.03% have more than 1,000 retweets<sup>24</sup>. This low percentage of retweets is quite striking and represents one of the main peculiarities of this dataset. Bruns et al. (2016) consider retweeting as one of the key elements to understand user engagement in hashtag publics. The low number of retweets can help frame the #MeToo public as “a communal 'audiencing' (cf. Fiske 1992) of media events where users participate in hashtagged posting, but comparatively rarely share additional external information in the form of new URLs or amplify other contributors' tweets by retweeting” (Bruns et al. 2016:3). This user behaviour is in contrast with “acute events” where users “help increase the visibility of already available material by frequently retweeting those tweets they deem to be important to others” (Bruns et al. 2016:3).

More generally, the low number of retweets, in combination with the high number of unique users, seems to suggest that the importance of the #MeToo conversation is due to the high volume of participation in the hashtag, rather than the specific content of any particular post. In a manner similar to Bruns' (2006) findings on news blogs, few tweets are politically significant when taken individually; it is rather the accumulation of tweets on the same topic that resonates. In other words, #MeToo gains its significance from the fact that an unparalleled amount of people used the hashtag to share their own stories and viewpoints on the issue. In the majority of cases, these inputs were generally deemed irrelevant by other users on an individual basis – hence the scarcity of retweets. This differentiates this type of Twitter conversation from “acute events” such as emergencies or breaking news stories, where authoritative sources of information are highly retweeted and become influential users (Bruns et al. 2016). Here, the content of individual posts is of little consequence to other users; the peculiarity of the conversation lies instead in the collective body of tweets, where individual voices constitute a chorus of shared experiences (Gleeson & Turner 2019).

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<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, the dataset does not differentiate between original tweets and retweet tweets. The only information available is the number of retweets on each post.

Rather than the contribution of certain users, then, it is the high level of participation that created the long-lasting impact of #MeToo.

Nevertheless, looking at retweets can still provide some further insights into the conversation. Table 7 shows the 20 posts with the highest number of retweets in the dataset<sup>25</sup>. The range of users who authored the most popular posts appears quite varied in comparison with the top mentioned users (see table 6).

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<sup>25</sup> The number of retweets is also influenced by the number of followers a user has, since this determines how many people will see the tweets on their timelines. Unfortunately, because the dataset does not include the number of followers for each user at the time of their post, it was not possible to “weigh” the number of retweets in this sense.

	User	Retweets	Type of user	Tweet
1	apbenven	55,406	News personality	Reminder that if a woman didn't post #MeToo , it doesn't mean she wasn't sexually assaulted or harassed. Survivors don't owe you their story.
2	funder	46,371	News personality	The 16 women who accused Trump of sexual assault are telling their story in one video-please share this far & wide. RT if you agree it's time for Trump to be held accountable for his sexual misconduct. #TrumpSexProbe #AMJoy #MeToo pic.twitter.com/hNlqZEI54G
3	funder	39,128	News personality	. @SpeakerRyan -Everyone who retweets this wants you to open up an investigation into the 20 sexual assault claims against Donald Trump. Quit being silent on the issue. Is your "fight against sexual misconduct" a complete fraud? It is if you don't probe Trump. #TrumpSexProbe #MeToo
4	womensmarch	31,924	Political organisation	To all the women sharing stories of sexual assault and sexual harassment, thank you for your bravery to speak up. You are not alone. #MeToo
5	McKaylaMaroney	30,370	Celebrity	#MeToo pic.twitter.com/IYXaDTuOsS
6	LeeannTweeden	25,457	Celebrity	I've decided it's time to tell my story. #MeToo <a href="http://www.kabc.com/2017/11/16/lee-ann-tweeden-on-senator-al-franken/">http://www.kabc.com/2017/11/16/lee-ann-tweeden-on-senator-al-franken/</a> ...
7	BetteMidler	23,166	Celebrity	Tomorrow is my birthday. I feel like this video was a gift from the universe to me. Geraldo may have apologized for his tweets supporting Matt Lauer, but he has yet to apologize for this. #MeToo pic.twitter.com/TkcolFWfA2
8	Simone_Biles	23,010	Celebrity	Feelings... #MeToo pic.twitter.com/ICiu0FCa0n
9	Pappiness	21,281	News personality	Men, Don't say you have a mother, a sister, a daughter... Say you have a father, a brother, a son who can do better. We all can. #MeToo
10	celia_yac	21,000	Individual	#balancetonporc Un homme marchait derrière moi, m'a mit la main entre les jambes 2 fois et m'a sorti «ça vous plait ?» j'ai porté plainte: pic.twitter.com/JWpHK6DTps
11	cnnbrk	18,982	News outlet	When I raise my hand, I am aware of all the women who are still in silence. - Actress Viola Davis references the #MeToo movement during the Women's March in Los Angeles <a href="http://cnn.it/2mUGcQb">http://cnn.it/2mUGcQb</a> pic.twitter.com/xPb5vvA4BL
12	GraceStarling4	16,452	Individual	For those carrying their #MeToo with them silently, you are loved, cherished, and believed. You do not owe your story to anyone.
13	itsgabrielleu	16,195	Celebrity	You know us. We are your family members. Your friends. Your co-workers. Your neighbors. And yes, even your heroes. We are everywhere. #Metoo <a href="https://twitter.com/SInow/status/920625777477144576">https:// twitter.com/SInow/status/920625777477144576</a> ...

14	Alyssa_Milano	15,462	Celebrity	At the very same time that we are asking Franken to resign from senate -- we are allowing an accused child molester to run for senate. At the very same time that Silence Breakers is the #TimePersonOfTheYear -- a self professed pussy grabber was runner-up. #MeToo
15	goldengateblond	14,522	Twitter influencer	Here's @Oprah 's entire speech. Watch it. If you've already seen it, watch it again. #MeToo #TimesUp <a href="https://pic.twitter.com/cAcVJreRzf">pic.twitter.com/cAcVJreRzf</a>
16	MarleeMatlin	13,545	Celebrity	#MeToo . I was 14, he was 36. I may be Deaf, but silence is the last thing you will ever hear from me. <a href="https://pic.twitter.com/hLmBJ7PgmK">pic.twitter.com/hLmBJ7PgmK</a>
17	benshapiro	12,843	News personality	Just reported @Rosie for targeted harassment, mainly to see if Twitter does indeed have a double standard. Everyone knows if Rosie were conservative, Twitter would suspend her in a hot second. So, Twitter, put your money where your mouth is. #MeToo
18	nowthisnews	12,808	News outlet	Life coach Tony Robbins says women are using #MeToo to make themselves 'significant' — but this brave sexual abuse survivor called him out <a href="https://pic.twitter.com/wYxhlmc10u">pic.twitter.com/wYxhlmc10u</a>
19	meliegodart	12,173	Individual	Quand tu lis les tweets sur #balancetonporc ... tu te rend compte que... <a href="https://pic.twitter.com/On7HkGWTjz">pic.twitter.com/On7HkGWTjz</a>
20	funder	11,675	News personality	Over 100 members of Congress (and counting) are now demanding an investigation into the 19 sexual assault allegations against Trump. RT if you agree Trump's sex crimes should be investigated immediately. #TrumpSexProbe #MeToo

*Table 7. Tweets with the highest number of retweets in the dataset.*

The role of journalists is more prominent in these highly retweeted tweets as six out of 20 are posted by news personalities, including three by the same author, Democratic writer and podcaster Scott Dworkin (@funder). Female celebrities are again included, either disclosing their own #MeToo stories or commenting on the #MeToo movement; two additional posts provide links to the #MeToo speeches of entertainment stars Viola Davis and Oprah Winfrey. While users categorised as political do not appear (with the exception of @womensmarch), some of the tweets make explicit political references in their content as they focus on Trump and Franken. Unlike the most mentioned users, authors of top retweeted posts also include a number of Twitter influencers and common users.

It is interesting to note that there is little overlap between the list of most mentioned users (Table 6) and the users of top retweeted posts. As previously suggested, mentioned users are subject of the conversation but do not contribute actively; conversely, most retweeted users are influential in spreading their messages but do not personally become central to the conversation.

Finally, two posts among the most retweeted are written in French, presenting a change to the predominant influence of English language and U.S. based users across the dataset. This trend is generally confirmed by looking at the location of users for the top 200 retweeted posts (Table 8): around 43% of users are based in the U.S., nearly 8% in France, and smaller percentages are distributed across the world.

Country	Frequency	Percent
USA	61	43.0
France	11	7.7
Global	10	7
UK	5	3.5
Spain	3	2.1
Canada	2	1.4
South Korea	2	1.4
Mexico	1	0.7
Germany	1	0.7
Norway	1	0.7
Australia	1	0.7
India	1	0.7
Not available	43	30.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 8. Location of users<sup>26</sup> for top 200 retweeted posts.

### 3. Adding new elements to the conversation: URLs and hashtags

Similarly, it is useful to consider whether tweets contain URLs linking outside Twitter to understand the way users engage in the conversation (Bruns et al. 2016). The inclusion of URLs in a tweet indicates that users choose to seek out additional material outside of Twitter to further the conversation, and that the conversation is not limited to the social media platform but engages with the wider media context. In the dataset, 29% of all tweets contain external URLs. This is a relatively low percentage which again falls under Bruns et al.'s (2016) definition of a “media event”, where users tend to offer their own contribution to the events they are witnessing rather than providing external sources.

The use of hashtags also gives insight into the way users engage in conversation. As Sauter & Bruns (2015) note, hashtags “mark out a specific discursive territory and

<sup>26</sup> As reported on user profile, accessed in August 2020. “Global” refers to locations set to “international”, “everywhere” and similar.

facilitate the coming together of participants with shared thematic interests” (p. 48). In addition to the hashtags that were used as criteria to select tweets for the construction of the dataset (see chapter 3), then, table 9 also shows the hashtags that users most often employed to discuss a variety of salient topics throughout the conversation. More or less consistently with the numbers presented in chapter 3, #MeToo is largely the most used hashtag; #balancetonporc, #12odb and #quellavoltache also feature consistently. In addition to the hashtags that originated the dataset, the hashtag #TimesUp is also often used in conjunction with #MeToo. Many hashtags comment on television programming or show business events that included discussion or messages on #MeToo, such as #am2dm, #goldenglobes, #oscars, #grammys and #oprah. This is in line with findings from section 1 of this chapter, showing that #MeToo activity is often closely related to prominent media events. These hashtags also offer commentary on real-time events, and therefore partly overlap with another group of hashtags that refer to offline protests, such as #marchforourlives (a demonstration against gun violence held in March 2018 in Washington, D.C.), #womensmarch2018 and #womensmarch (2018 edition of the Women's March, see chapter 3). Correspondingly, a number of hashtags focus on national politics. The majority refer to U.S. politics, showing again a polarised approach especially around the figure of Donald Trump in connection with #MeToo. U.S. political hashtags include #maga (short for “Make America Great Again”, a slogan used by Trump supporters) #trump, #resist and #theresistance (hashtags used by anti-Trump protesters). A smaller, but significant percent of hashtags focus on other national contexts, namely #abusefreeindia and #svpol (Swedish politics).

Finally, a number of hashtags discuss some of the most prominent men accused of sexual violence and harassment, most notably Harvey Weinstein, as well as Bill Cosby and Aziz Ansari (whose case will be analysed in depth in chapter 5).

	<b>Hashtag</b>	<b>Percent</b>
1	#metoo	72.6
2	#balancetonporc	4.1
3	#120db	1
4	#timesup	0.8
5	#am2dm	0.5
6	#quellavoltache	0.3
7	#goldenglobes	0.2
8	#oscars	0.2
9	#abusefreeindia	0.2
10	#maga	0.1
11	#marchforourlives	0.1
12	#resist	0.1
13	#trump	0.1
14	#sexualharassment	0.1
15	#hollywood	0.1
16	#weinstein	0.1
17	#women	0.1
18	#harveyweinstein	0.1
19	#womensmarch2018	0.1
20	#theresistance	0.1
21	#grammys	0.1
22	#oprah	0.1
23	#feminism	0.1
24	#womensmarch	0.1
25	#svpol	0.1
26	#resistance	0.1
27	#sexualassault	0.1
28	#billcosby	0.1
29	#azizansari	0.1
30	#internationalwomensday	0.1

*Table 9. Most used hashtags in the dataset.*

#### 4. The #MeToo Twitter public

Some initial reflections can be put forward based on the results of the analysis presented so far.

The first interesting result comes from the combined analysis of the selected national hashtags; this represents an innovative element since most of existing studies focused on #MeToo alone (Clark-Parsons 2019; Trott 2020) or on single national hashtags (Knüpfer et al. 2020)<sup>27</sup>. Observing the start of the movement's various hashtags in October 2017 (Figg. 1-2) shows how, curiously, different online communities across the globe simultaneously chose the same medium to disseminate a very similar message. In this sense, the hashtag communities that formed can be understood as *ad hoc* issue publics (Bruns & Burgess 2011, 2015). Ad hoc publics form in response to real-time events, thanks to the unique affordances of Twitter such as the ability to create and disseminate new hashtags instantaneously and to participate in hashtagged discussions easily. Ad hoc publics are created “the moment they are needed” (Bruns & Burgess 2011:7) – this helps explain why, in October 2017, different communities across the world felt the shared need to respond to the ongoing post-Weinstein conversation collectively through the use of hashtags. The fact that Twitter publics were responding to a conversation that was already taking place on different media also serves to remind that Twitter is but

one fragment of the public sphere, alongside a range of others; it is neither entirely separate from them (since its constituency of users overlaps with theirs, and communication flows across their borders), nor completely homologous with them (since different sociotechnical affordances enable different forms and themes of communication). (Bruns & Burgess 2011:6)

This is particularly true for #MeToo, which arose in response to the journalistic investigations on Weinstein and continued to be discussed across a variety of media platforms; in this sense “#MeToo is indivisible from the media platforms through which it has circulated” (Boyle 2019:3). This point can also contribute to a more

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<sup>27</sup> With the exception of Zacchia, Corsi & Botti (2019) who used the same dataset for a comparative analysis.

nuanced definition of #MeToo. #MeToo is commonly referred to as a hashtag campaign or a movement; yet, as it has been shown, the centrality of the hashtag does not imply that the activities take place only on social media. Indeed, the reach of #MeToo spans across multiple networked public spheres.

Yet, after the initial emergence of the #MeToo ad hoc public, the sustained engagement with the hashtag over a period of six months (and more: see Anderson & Toor 2018; Boyle & Rathnayake 2019) troubles the conceptualisation by Bruns & Burgess (2011). A central question in the literature on digital activism has been whether short-lived moments of “togetherness” can translate into more durable “community” (Castells 2012; Gerbaudo 2012). The pattern of #MeToo activity over time would seem to contradict pessimistic techno-commercial perspectives that see moments of “togetherness” among social media users as “ephemeral”, destined to dissolve as soon as the next wave of trending topics emerges (Poell & Van Dijck 2015:534). This process is seen as unavoidable since it is built into the platform architecture, as “Twitter algorithmically privileges breaking news and viral content dissemination over long-term issues of interest” (Poell & Van Dijck 2015:531). Conversely, the temporal distribution of all #MeToo tweets (Fig. 3) demonstrates sustained engagement with the topic, and the presence of multiple peaks also indicates users' ability to revive participation many times over the course of six months. In addition, De Benedictis et al. (2019) suggest that the central themes of “feminist protest, sexual violence and celebrity culture” (p. 12) that characterise activity peaks also contribute to the continued visibility of the campaign, as these topics are able to consistently attract the public's attention.

At the same time, data on user participation and retweets confirms trends in the personalisation of online activism, where “individuals' own narratives rather than collective identity frames become important in activist mobilization and communication processes” (Poell & Van Dijck 2015:532). As introduced in chapter 2, the concept of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg 2012) is particularly useful to understand participation in #MeToo, since the hashtag seems to include all of its defining elements. The core political “action theme” of anti-rape activism (contained

in the use of the #MeToo hashtag) becomes “easy-to-personalize” (Bennett & Segerberg 2012:742) as users only need to post the hashtag and elaborate their own story. These stories are then shared via communication technology, such as social media platforms, through which they are disseminated to personal networks (such as Facebook friends) or on more “public” platforms, such as Twitter. The framing of #MeToo within “popular feminism” (Banet-Weiser 2018) is also in line with the “propensity to develop flexible political identifications based on personal lifestyles” (Bennett & Segerberg 2012:744) rather than on traditional political affiliation<sup>28</sup>.

This does not mean, however, that #MeToo posts can be written off as low-effort political participation. It is important to underline that taking part in the sharing of personal experience of sexual harassment and violence requires a high volume of *emotional labour*, both from those post their own stories and those who act as audience and supporters. Posting and reading about sexual violence “demands a significant emotional investment and resilience from participants in showing their support” and “can cause additional stress and the reliving of [one’s] own trauma” (Loney-Howes 2020:52-53). In her study of online anti-rape activism, Loney-Howes (2020) found that around half of participants in similar campaigns took part out of a wish “to show solidarity and support for others” and “to promote social justice” (p. 52). Only smaller percentages of participants reported more individualistic motivations, such as wanting to share their own stories and getting emotional support.

The swift formation of the #MeToo public also testifies to the widespread consolidation of hashtag activism, particularly for feminist causes, as described in chapter 2. The narrative form that the hashtag suggested also represents a continuation of the classical feminist practice of speaking out against sexual violence. Interestingly, while telling one’s experience was explicitly encouraged by the early Italian and French hashtags, Milano’s tweet only asked to share the phrase “Me Too”

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<sup>28</sup> This point will be somewhat refuted in the next section.

with no additional commentary; however, users immediately transformed it into a hashtag and began adding their own stories (Gleeson & Turner 2019). This shows how the feminist legacy of speaking out has become consolidated: after the Weinstein revelations, women immediately resorted to the recollection and sharing of personal experiences, as they had done many times since second-wave feminism (Serisier 2018). Additionally, and relatedly, the use of narrative hashtags on social media was also immediately adopted, since it had already been popularised by previous feminist campaigns and people were already familiar with the rules of hashtag protests.

Following Fraser's (2007) invite to “rethink public sphere theory in a transnational frame” (p. 8), it is useful to inquire whether the participation of multiple national publics in the same hashtag protest can constitute a form of transnational social movement. To an extent, the development of the hashtag movement reflects Castells' (2015) contention that contemporary activism is less tied to national contexts and more concerned with issues that are perceived to affect all of humanity. This increasingly transnational nature of activism is in great part a result of internet-based communication, which allows people to transcend national boundaries and see themselves as part of wider global networks sharing common concerns:

Movements are [...] global, because they are connected throughout the world, they learn from other experiences, and in fact they are often inspired by these experiences to engage in their own mobilization. They express an acute consciousness of the intertwining of issues and problems for humanity at large, and they clearly display a cosmopolitan culture, being rooted in their specific identity. (Castells 2015:250–251)

In this sense, #MeToo can be positioned within a wider trend of recent of “feminist actions whose efficacy relies on their translocal and transnational articulation” (Baer 2016:18). These include previous digital campaigns (see chapter 2) as well as protests that took physical forms such as SlutWalk, FEMEN, and Pussy Riot. These protests differ from #MeToo, which saw nearly no physical events. What all of these actions have in common is their ability to obtain attention in the media on a global scale through highly visible protest tactics. In the case of physical protests, this takes the

form of provocative demonstrations<sup>29</sup>, while digital campaigns and especially #MeToo relied on large-scale engagement and participation of celebrities to obtain global attention. Although they differ in their strategies, all of these actions have a transnational appeal as they aim to “reveal the pervasive, structural nature of sexual violence, linking the specific, local stories of individual women to larger narratives of inequality” (Baer 2016:18). For example, Garibotti & Hopp (2019) illustrate how in Argentina local activists capitalised on the #MeToo moment to draw attention to the local feminist agenda on issues such as abortion and femicide.

At the same time, there are further elements that define transnational feminism, as Zerbe Enns et al. (2020) contend:

Transnational feminist theory and practice [...] seek to destabilize notions that women around the world share the same types of experiences, oppressions, forms of exploitation, and privileges; they explore differences and inequalities between women, such as different priorities and ways of understanding gender issues and different ways of conceptualizing agency.  
(p. 2)

While highlighting the commonality of the experience of sexual violence, then, transnational feminism should also be able to analyse different power relations and inequality that shape local contexts. The reliance of #MeToo on white, privileged celebrities to obtain attention therefore represents an obstacle to achieving these goals, as stardom and sensationalism can obfuscate the meaning of the movement. This is confirmed in the Twitter analysis that shows how online attention is predominantly directed at famous individuals rather than common users. This ends up working *against* the strategy of visibility, as the central message of the movement gets lost and public attention gets misdirected:

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<sup>29</sup> “SlutWalk promotes a critical gaze at the issue of un/dress and encourages participants to join protests wearing modest dress or showing skin, but it has gained notoriety for its display of scantily clad bodies. FEMEN’s trademark “sextremism” is defined by the bare breast as a symbol of defiance. Pussy Riot deployed the DIY-balaclava as a central signifier of contemporary feminism, calling attention to the female body through masking and covering” (Baer 2016:23).

Some of the more spectacular #MeToo moments, such as when the celebrity components of the story distract us from systemic, structural sexism across all industries, can end up working against the calls for social change promised at its beginning, producing more and more visibility—and increasingly narrowing the discourses of that visibility in the process. (Banet Weiser 2018:17)

## 5. #MeToo and US politics

At the same, however, the dominance of the U.S.-led #MeToo hashtag is also evident. The concept of visibility (Banet-Weiser 2015, 2018) has been identified as central to contemporary online feminism. Particularly on digital platforms, visibility and popularity are key principles of social media logic: “the pursuit of online attention become[s] part of a media logic that influences what people find important” (van Dijck & Poell 2013:7). Basic metrics are sufficient to determine which hashtag proved most popular, as 94% of total posts include the hashtag #MeToo. The top mentioned users (Table 6) and top retweeted posts (Table 7) - which represent the users and posts that received the most attention – show the centrality of U.S. political figures and organisations in the debate, with partisan hostility at times overshadowing the core concern of combating sexual violence. This prevalence of U.S.-centric politics in the conversation weakens the transnational nature of the movement, since the unequal distribution of online attention hinders the global commonality of women's experiences of violence.

More specifically, this last point draws attention to an issue that seems to have been underexamined in the literature on #MeToo so far (with the exceptions of Boyle & Rathnayake 2019; Pollino 2020). These metrics suggest that, to an extent, #MeToo has become a polarising issue in U.S. partisan politics, and that it was often weaponised by rival political factions. As explained in chapter 3, protests against President Trump provided fertile ground for the escalation of #MeToo, and indeed he appears to be a central figure in the discussion, with 4.4% of all tweets in the dataset mentioning

him<sup>30</sup>. A similar polarisation can be observed in the top 100 mentions: among the most mentioned political accounts, 8 are Republican politicians or groups, while 10 are Democrats.

In this sense, it can be said that the #MeToo conversation reflects the “highly polarised political climate in the USA” (Boyle & Rathnayake 2019:1). Siding “with” or “against” #MeToo quickly became source of division in the same manner as other social issues that characterise American “culture wars” (Hunter 1992), such as abortion, LGBTQ+ rights and climate change. Opinions on these matters often run alongside conservative/liberal denominations, and they are so steeped in competing moral visions that opposite views are often irreconcilable. As a result, issues that are social in nature become shorthand for political affiliation. In this sense, it is arguable that #MeToo was in many instances used for political ends that were partially removed from the original intent of combating sexist violence. For example, three out of the top 20 retweeted posts are by Democratic writer and podcaster Scott Dworkin (@funder), and they all call for an investigation into the sexual assault allegations against Donald Trump. In this instance, liberals are using the increased intolerance for sexual misconduct and capitalising on the #MeToo momentum to mobilise against the president.

A more complex picture of the implications of #MeToo for oppositional party politics emerges in this tweet by Alyssa Milano, which received 15,462 retweets:

At the very same time that we are asking Franken to resign from senate --  
we are allowing an accused child molester to run for senate.

At the very same time that "Silence Breakers" is the #TimePersonOfTheYear  
-- a self professed pussy grabber was runner-up.

#MeToo (@Alyssa\_Milano Dec 6, 2017)

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<sup>30</sup> This figure includes mentions for @realdonaldtrump and @potus, and search results for the word “Trump” in the posts.

In the first half of the tweet, Milano expresses her support the calls for Democratic Senator Al Franken to resign following allegations of sexual improprieties. At the same time, she points to the contradiction of another accused sexual predator running for Senate, Republican Roy Moore, who had received Trump's endorsement two days before this tweet. In the second half of the tweet, another parallel is drawn between the cultural impact of #MeToo – exemplified by the Time magazine cover – and, again, the unsuitability of having an accused sexual predator as president. This position well encapsulates the tension of the co-existence of “popular feminism” and “popular misogyny” described by Banet-Weiser (2018).

The present dataset only covers the #MeToo conversation until April 2018; it is definite that this political polarisation was further exacerbated in September-October 2018, when Judge Brett Kavanaugh was nominated and then confirmed as a Supreme Court Justice despite multiple accusations of sexual assault. In response to the controversy, Kavanaugh supporters began using the hashtag #HimToo on social media in opposition to #MeToo. In their analysis of both hashtags on Twitter, Dejmanee et al. (2020) confirm “Banet-Weiser’s (2018) notion that popular feminism and popular misogyny are structurally linked and emerge through the same cultural and technical mechanisms, particularly in reference to the attention economy and social media platforms”. The same polarisation of attitudes was also reflected in Donald Trump's own words on the Kavanaugh controversy, as he declared that “It's a very scary time for young men in America when you can be guilty of something you might not be guilty of. It's a very, very difficult time”. When asked he had a message for young women, he responded by stating that “women are doing great.”<sup>31</sup>

While an in-depth discussion of U.S. partisan politics is beyond the scope of this research, a wider point can be made from analyses of the Kavanaugh case. As Pollino (2020) found in her analysis of media reporting on the controversy, there is a widespread belief that sexual violence is not the central issue in such cases, but it is rather a vehicle used to further a political agenda:

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<sup>31</sup> The theme of men as the “real victims” of #MeToo is discussed at length in chapter 7.

Sexual violence, then, is not the focal point of the conversation; it exists as another fleeting component in a back-and-forth power struggle. This misrepresentation occurs, in large part, due to pervasive conceptualizations of sexual violence as either made up stories to hide behavior, or the utter disbelief that a certain person could commit such a violent act. (Pollino 2020:78)

When it gets mixed up with politics, then, speaking out against sexual violence is seen as a mere political tactic aimed at smearing an opponent, rather than as calling to attention to a problem in its own right. Paradoxically, the speaking out of survivors gains attention while at the same time its central message gets discredited. This shows, again, the complexities of using visibility as a protest tactic.

## Chapter 5

### Twitter discourse on the accusations against Aziz Ansari

The first case analysed in the qualitative stage is the discussion of the allegations against Aziz Ansari, a well-known American comedian and actor, that were published on the website Babe.net. Shortly before this, Ansari had stated his support for #MeToo and #TimesUp, in line with his public persona as a feminist, progressive millennial man (Framke 2018). On 13 January 2018, the website Babe.net released a story entitled “I went on a date with Aziz Ansari. It turned into the worst night of my life” (Way 2018), as told to reporter Katie Way by a 23-year-old photographer who used the pseudonym “Grace”. Grace recounted going out on a date with Ansari, who during the evening invited her to his apartment. He then repeatedly pressured her into sexual acts despite her growing discomfort, until she left distraught. After talking the events of the night over with her friends, and after seeing Ansari win an award at the Golden Globes, Grace said she felt compelled to speak out about what she perceived to be sexual assault. Ansari later released a statement to say that he had been “surprised and concerned” with Grace's allegations, claiming he believed that their sexual activity had been “completely consensual”. He also added that he continued “to support the movement that is happening in our culture. It is necessary and long overdue” (Stelloh 2018).

This story garnered attention because it fell outside of the #MeToo “media template” that had been constructed thus far (Salter 2019:318). While it involved allegations against a famous man in a public forum, this case was different because the two individuals had no professional relation, Ansari held no formal power over the woman, and his actions did not classify as sexual assault or harassment in criminal law definitions. As the article was published shortly after the Weinstein scandal, the incident was framed by the media as part of the wider #MeToo reckoning, and

managed to spark a debate on the role of consent in everyday settings and on the boundaries of what constitutes sexual violence.

In order to understand the conversation that took place on Twitter following the publication of the Babe.net story, 980 tweets were selected for analysis. Reflecting the fact that the story concerns an American celebrity, 95.5% of tweets are in English; other languages include French, Spanish and German. 43% of all tweets contain external URLs. The analysis generated 51 thematic codes; this number speaks to the complexity of the discussion that followed the publication of the story. Many tweets were annotated with more than one code, with tweets presenting up to 7 different codes. A preliminary outline of all codes is provided below (Table 10). The codes were then re-organised into wider themes on the basis of their significance for the present study. These are illustrated in the rest of this chapter.

*Table 10. Overview of all codes for the Babe.net story*

#### **Understanding the Babe.net story**

- User's opinion on the story
  - Sides with Ansari
  - Sides with Grace
    - Ansari is "canceled"
  - Feels ambivalent
- The event is not sexual assault
- Stereotypes about Ansari
- Himpathy
  - Ansari's life is ruined
  - All men have been in a similar situation
- Normalisation of non-consensual sex
  - "Bad sex" / "bad date"
- Grace is responsible for getting herself in this situation / not leaving
- Attitudes toward Grace
  - She is crazy
  - She is a jilted lover
  - She is lying
  - She regrets having consensual sex

- She wants to get revenge
  - The story is “revenge porn”
- Role of power relations
- Lack of journalistic integrity from Babe.net

#### **Implications of the story**

- Need to believe women
  - Importance of speaking out
- User personally relates to the story
  - User finds the story triggering
- Tips on “avoiding” assault
- Stories like this are normal in current dating
- Need to address “gray area” in sexual encounters
- Proposing solutions to address the problem
- Mentions of consent
- Ansari identifying as a feminist
- Political implications
  - For liberals
  - For conservatives

#### **Perceptions of #MeToo movement**

- Exasperation with yet another #MeToo case
- #MeToo represents a cultural shift
- Role of feminism
- #MeToo is puritanical / bigoted
- #MeToo depicts women as victims
- #MeToo has gone too far
  - #MeToo is a witch hunt
- Story damages #MeToo
- Story is not serious enough for #MeToo
  - Not as bad as other #MeToo men
  - Not as bad as "real" sexual assault victims

### **1. Interpretations of the Babe.net story**

Since #MeToo is a movement against sexual violence, the framing of the Ansari incident within the context of #MeToo means that the man’s actions became situated as a form of sexual violence in media reports. This view, however, appears at odds with

dominant notions that characterise sexual violence as an explicitly and physically violent act carried out by a stranger (Fileborn & Phillips 2019).

Indeed, many Twitter users in the sample were quick to take a stand “for” or “against” Ansari, deciding whether he was “innocent” or “guilty” of sexual assault on the basis of Grace’s account. This reflects a tendency to construct sexual violence in binary terms, seeing “sex and sexual violence as belonging to entirely different realms of experience” (Gunnarson 2018) and dividing men’s behaviour into either “aberrant” or “typical” behaviour (Stanko 1985).

A slightly more numerous group of users appear aggressively defensive of Ansari’s actions, certain that his behaviour does not constitute sexual assault. Building on Fricker’s concept of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007, see chapter 1), Yap (2017) argues that when telling a story of alleged assault, two types of reactions from the hearer are possible. The first type are those where “if a listener did believe the events took place just as described, they would believe that there had been a sexual assault” (Yap 2017:14); but in such cases the listener does not believe that the events took place as described at all. The second type are cases “where the parties involved can agree on the literal sequence of events, but disagree significantly about the concept under which those events fall” (Yap 2017:14), specifically whether those events constitute sexual assault or something else. All tweets in the sample fall under the second category<sup>32</sup>: nobody questions that Grace actually went out with Ansari, that they went back to his apartment, that they engaged in sexual activity and, most importantly, that she felt uneasy about it afterwards. What this group of users contest is how these events should be interpreted. They contend that Grace’s understanding of her experience is incorrect, and offer alternative interpretations of the events that they deem more plausible according to dominant (hetero)sexual scripts. These alternative

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<sup>32</sup> Reasoning belonging to the first category could also have taken place at a more unconscious level. According to dominant notions of masculinity and male sexuality, it might seem implausible that a famous and successful actor would need to coerce a woman in order to obtain sex. This would contribute to the need to find another plausible explanation for the story, relying on the more common trope that the woman is lying (Yap 2017).

interpretations apply to two interrelated aspects: the nature of the encounter and Grace's motivations for divulging the story. The experience of the night is repeatedly framed as “bad sex” or a “bad date”, positioning the encounter as a consensual one, albeit an unpleasant one for Grace:

#AzizAnsari If you did ALL OF THAT with him, then think it was a bad date, well that's all it was... A BAD DATE. Don't use #MeToo because you have regrets [...] (14 January; 1 F)<sup>33</sup>

Stop using #MeToo to call out bad sex. Bad sex and rape and not one in the same. It doesn't mean to throw yourself at Aziz Ansari and when he takes the bait you then later rethink whether or not intercourse was too soon. YES women ARE completely culpable for their actions too. (23 March)

Through this re-framing of the incident, men's use of pressure and coercion is normalised and presented as an acceptable and ordinary element of (hetero)sexual encounters (cf. Hinds & Fileborn 2019). It is noteworthy that Grace's feelings are not invalidated, as these users acknowledge her discomfort, but the distress of a woman having to deal with a man's unwanted advances is also seen as part of a normal date. Grace is also criticised for allegedly failing to communicate her needs clearly, mirroring neoliberal discourses on feminism that push women to be assertive and agentic (Worthington 2020).

Grace's discomfort, then, is not caused directly by Ansari's problematic behaviour, but by her own contradictory feelings about the evening, which eventually led her to make her story public. In order to make sense of Grace's actions, users resort to a number of tropes and stereotypes relating to sexual violence survivors (Yap 2017; Hinds & Fileborn 2019). Grace is described as a “crazy chick”, “mindless with rage”, a manipulative liar, and as disappointed because she expected romance instead of casual sex:

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<sup>33</sup> All tweets are reported verbatim. The number of retweets (RT) and favourites (F) is reported when present. For additional multimedia elements (URLs, photos, videos) a short description is provided.

Telling a man to 'slow down' is not the same as 'No! Get the F off me!' I'm annoyed with any woman that misuses the #MeToo movement. #AzizAnsari's career is at risk because this female opportunist wants to cry wolf. He should sue her for defamation! [...] (16 January)

This grace chick was just mad at #AzizAnsari because she thought it was gonna be more of a relationship and realized she was just a fuck for the night. That's all. This is not a #MeToo situation at all (18 January)

The explanation that is most consistently put forward, however, is that Grace engaged in consensual sexual activity with Ansari, and later regretted it; because she feels uneasy with her decision, she attempts to shift the blame on him by publicly denouncing him:

The moral of this story is that consent depends on how the girl is feeling after the event. If she regrets it then there was no consent. NO means NO and YES also means no depending on the mood. (14 January; 3 RT, 3 F)

When you regret sleeping with Aziz Ansari please don't accuse him of RAPE (14 January; 17 RT, 69 F)

Similarly, Grace is accused of wanting to exact revenge on Ansari because she was disappointed with how the date turned out. An interesting development of this view is a re-framing of Grace's actions as “revenge porn”. The expression is used in an article published by The Atlantic, entitled “The Humiliation of Aziz Ansari” that was widely shared on Twitter<sup>34</sup>: “what [Grace] and the writer who told her story created was 3,000 words of revenge porn. The clinical detail in which the story is told is intended not to validate her account as much as it is to hurt and humiliate Ansari” (Flanagan 2018). The same comment is made in a small number of tweets; it is unclear whether all users picked up the expression from the article (some include a direct link in their tweets) or if some of them arrived at the same conclusion independently:

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<sup>34</sup> Hindes & Fileborn (2019) found the same expression in one article from their sample of Australian press on the case.

This really nails the Aziz Ansari story. It was revenge porn. The woman had a bad date and used the #MeToo movement. The women who jumped on board, the ones calling us rape apologists, you are the problem, too. [attached: link to the article by Flanagan (2018)] (15 January; 23 F)

This leads to a perceived “humiliation” of Ansari, which in turn elicits in some users what Manne (2018) calls “himpathy”: the “disproportionate sympathy powerful men often enjoy in cases of sexual assault, intimate partner violence, homicide and other misogynistic behavior” (p. 210; see also Boyle and Rathnayake 2019; Andreasen 2020). This attitude is particularly exacerbated by the belief that Ansari’s behaviour was harmless and the accusations against him do not hold weight. Having established that Grace is not the victim of the incident, Ansari is recast as the true victim of false accusations. Specifically, users believe that these public allegations risk ruining his career and life forever, as had happened to other #MeToo men before him. They therefore express their support for Ansari, with the underlying belief that the #MeToo movement is out to destroy men’s lives with baseless accusations:

Jesus Christ, this is absolutely ridiculous. Aziz Ansari deserves our support on this. He did nothing wrong. The accuser, on the other hand, has publicly humiliated him for no reason -- possibly derailing his career. PATHETIC. #MeToo (14 January; 6 RT, 28 F)

Poor guy Aziz Ansari, dragged through the coals by this witch hunting #MeToo for having a night with a woman who didn't articulate her thoughts and expected him to read her mind once she got home & regretted it. Disgusting attempt to destroy someone's life. (15 January)

Additionally, and in line with the normalisation of “bad sex” that was discussed above, Ansari’s behaviour is also presented as common for men, eliciting more expressions of male solidarity:

I stand with @azizansari #metoo we've all been in the same situation. This is getting out of control. (14 January)

@babedotnet The “article” about #AzizAnsari is not journalism. It's just a revenge rant from a whiny girl who, like so many of us, simply went on a bad date. Get over it and don't ruin careers. [...] (15 January)

On the other side of the fence, a smaller group of users firmly believe in Grace's account of the events and accept her as a true victim. Consequently, they are vehemently critical of Ansari and his behaviour:

Celebrities, including those who are believed to be #wokebae like #AzizAnsari, don't get a pass when it comes to being gross, selfish, aggressive assholes. We must hold everyone to the same necessary standards of human decency and mutual sexual respect. #MeToo #TimesUp (17 January)

@azizansari is a sexual predator. Anyone defending this horrible behavior is an enabler and a true piece of trash. (15 January)

Expressions of sympathy for Grace are often connected to a wider call to “believe women” who come forward with allegations of sexual violence, in line with the feminist practice of speaking out in order to get informal justice. In this sense, users call for an exercise of *testimonial justice* (Fricker 2007:92, see chapter 1), aiming to counter dominant patriarchal norms that tend to disbelieve women. Users also tend to underline that speaking out can often be difficult for survivors, presenting it as an additional reason why women should be believed, and praise the courage of those who come forward:

The Aziz Ansari story is just another nail in the coffin that something needs to be done. Believe the victim firstly, always. It's hard to pluck up the courage to speak the truth, never mind in such detail. #MeToo #TimesUp (14 January)

Why can't she use her real name if she's so for #MeToo? People really forgetting that this probably is hard for her to call out Aziz Ansari same for other women. They're strong as hell for speaking out. #TimesUp (14 January)

At the same time, some users also empathise with Grace because they relate to her experience personally; they reveal that they have had episodes in their lives that resemble this incident and that they find troublesome. Solidarity for Grace therefore stems from a recognition of the commonality of her experience:

everything here! and the sad truth that we have all been on weird dates that were basically sexual assault but were too afraid to call it that. [attached: link to an article titled “On Aziz Ansari And ‘Bad Sex’” on Bust.com] (17 January)

I've experienced the same kind of date situations Aziz Ansari's accuser is reporting. It is all too common. So common it seems to have become an accepted part of dating and just how it is. [attached: link to a blog post authored by the user titled “#MeToo Harassment is Standard in Dating”] (15 January; 3 F)

Finally, a third group of users admit that they are ambivalent about the case, as they grapple with the complexities of the situation. Some believe that there is not enough information to make a judgement about the case, while others think that the account is problematic:

sounds like there aren't enough facts for claims on either side? always a supporter as i am a member of the #metoo movement--- but. this is too early and too unclear. #AzizAnsari (14 January; 2 F)

I have deep reservations about that Aziz Ansari story. Details are troubling but I'm not sure that's a #metoo tale. (14 January; 2 F)

## **2. Interplays of race and gender**

The discussion is further complicated by taking into account the intersection of gender and race at play in the story. As explained in chapter 3, one of the main criticisms against #MeToo is its distinctive focus on white, attractive celebrities at the expense of more marginalised, non-white voices, as exemplified by the (inadvertent) appropriation of the phrase “me too” by Alyssa Milano. The Ansari story brings to light some problematic constructions of race and gender. Ansari is well-known as a secular Muslim Indian-American man. Grace's ethnicity, on the other hand, is unknown, but she is commonly assumed to be white since whiteness is “the default normative identity in the United States” (Dubrofsky & Levina 2020:2).

In the sample, Grace's accusations are sometimes positioned within a longer racist history of women accusing men of colour of sexual assault. In this sense, Grace is

perceived as a privileged white woman who is politicising a harmless event in order to perpetuate the subordination of a man of colour. This mirrors a construction of whiteness as “a position of structural power that is concerned with maintaining that power” (Phipps 2019:11). This attack is made worse by the belief, outlined above, that Ansari's behaviour was actually innocuous:

Aziz Ansari is not guilty of rape or sexual assault, and I bet you a million dollars that Grace is nothing more than a white hipster bitch from Brooklyn that is once again trying to attempt to derail a man of color's reputation. #MeToo #TimesUp #AzizAnsari (18 January; 2 F)

I thought it would take a little longer for the hit squad of privileged young white women to open fire on brown-skinned men<sup>35</sup>. #MeToo #AzizAnsari #TimesUp (14 January)

The problematic history of white privilege in the feminist movement is also brought up. Phipps highlights “the role of narcissism in white identity, which is evident politically in the belief that white experience can stand for that of all others”; in this case, “in Western public feminisms against sexual violence [...] universalizing claims about gendered victimhood are based on the experiences of white women” (Phipps 2019:10). Issues of racial dynamic and of colonial and racist histories are therefore forgotten, and men of colour are again victimised:

Re: @azizansari. Every time a pop feminist like @JessicaValenti<sup>36</sup> claims that we need to believe every #metoo accusation, credulous or not, I'm reminded of #EmmettTill. The history of brown and black men being lynched for false sexual accounts in this country cannot be discounted. (16 January; 1 RT, 2 F)

Bcoz of these fake feminism .. Brown Guys like me will be Shit scared of dating women and asking them to come to my apartment...Lol... #FakeFeminist #MeToo #metoo movement #AzizAnsari (16 January)

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<sup>35</sup> This is a direct quote from the article by Caitlin Flanagan (2018) in The Atlantic.

<sup>36</sup> Jessica Valenti is an American feminist writer and journalist, co-founder of the popular feminist website Feministing.com.

Problematic racial dynamics also emerge from interpretations of the episode as “a racist story about Ansari, using popular tropes about South Asian men as romantically incompetent” (Dubrofsky & Levina 2020:9). This appears first and foremost in the original article, where Grace compares “Ansari’s sexual mannerisms to those of a horny, rough, entitled 18-year-old” (Way 2018). The trope of the sexually keen, but inept South Asian man is picked up by some users in the sample:

My “issue” is that this anecdote tends to dilute the impact of #metoo. Never argued that Ansari wasn’t acting like a hyper-sexual teen, just that her date didn’t turn out to be what she expected and she did not know how to change the dynamic. Or even have the good sense to leave. (16 January)

Honestly it’s sad that we’ve reached the point in the Me Too Movement where practically harmless awkward horny men are getting accused of sexual assault. It’s sad bc it cheapens the significance of real victims who were actually raped. Before you get mad, it’s #MeToo #AzizAnsari (14 January; 1 F)

The inoffensiveness of Ansari is also reinforced through hegemonic constructions of masculinity (Connell 2005). As an Indian-American man of slight build, Ansari is perceived as physically incapable of exercising violence, in contrast with, for example, popular depictions of the overweight, “monstrous” Weinstein (Boyle 2019:117). This depiction is reinforced by Ansari’s public persona as a sensitive, thoughtful feminist man. This view, then, reflects the widespread rape myth that sexual violence necessarily “requires the use of overt physical force and violence” (Hindes & Fileborn 2019:9) and can only be carried out by physically overpowering men:

#MeToo I think it’s a travesty that Aziz Ansari is being accused of sexual misconduct. This is entirely false. The guy is only 5’nothing & 104 lbs. any regular sized woman would beat him down. Who was it against, one of the little women of ATL? & Juicy<sup>37</sup> could kick his ass. [attached: an animated GIF of ATL’s “Juicy”] (16 January; 1 RT, 1 F)

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<sup>37</sup> Reference to *Little Women: Atlanta*, a reality TV show about women with dwarfism; “Juicy” is one of the cast members.

Dubrofsky & Levina (2020) argue that in the original Babe.net article, racist tropes about Ansari are used to intensify the gravity of Grace's experience, since they are used to highlight the violation of a white woman by a dark-skinned man. In the Twitter sample, some users unmask these racist tropes and therefore discredit the whole story as simply an attack on a man of colour. Other users also make use of the same racist tropes to discredit Ansari's role as a perpetrator because he does not fit the description of a “real” sexual predator.

### **3. The case in relation to #MeToo**

Since #MeToo is a movement to combat sexual violence, users' view on the interpretation of this case as sexual assault have been discussed. The second dimension explores how users use the Ansari case to express their views about #MeToo as a movement, and, sometimes simultaneously, about feminism.

The first, widespread result is an exasperation with the fact that Ansari represents yet another one in a long line of men who are being exposed by #MeToo.

So Aziz Ansari done got caught up in this #MeToo #TimesUp movement too? At this rate, every male actor in the industry will be revealed as a pervert. (14 January)

In line with the interpretations that do not see Grace's experience as sexual assault, but merely as a “bad date”, many users are adamant that the case is not serious enough to belong in the realm of #MeToo, and thus position it outside of the bounds of the #MeToo movement. Some explicitly call for the need to “draw a line” between what is #MeToo and what is not:

@AzizAnsari\_ To Anonymous Accuser: There was no threat, no relevant power dynamic, no force, and the freedom to leave. Those big differences separate this situation from #metoo and make it just a lame date. We need to draw a line to determine what is real assault to be relevant. (15 January)

For me the article was clearly unfair and has little or nothing to do with #metoo, but was necessary in order to put limits on what is and is not part of the movement. Ansari's outing is nothing of the sort, and from here on in we can keep the conversation within bounds. (16 January; 1 F)

This leads to what is perhaps the most challenging point in this sample. Many users claim that by including the Ansari case within the wider movement, #MeToo has “gone too far” and lost credibility. More specifically, users' attitudes on this point can again be divided into three groups: those who had been dismissive of #MeToo and see this episode as the last straw, those who were mostly wary of #MeToo and see this episode as confirming their suspicions, and those who have always been supportive of #MeToo but think that this episode is damaging to the movement. This is a somewhat loose categorisation, as it will become apparent from the discussion.

The first group of users claim that the publication of the accusations against Ansari means that #MeToo has “gone too far” and turned the entire movement into a joke. These users seem to have always been partly dismissive of #MeToo, even before the Babe.net story was published. They now see the Ansari episode as revealing the true colours of the movement:

I knew the whole #MeToo movement was complete bullshit when they started targeting Aziz Ansari - he did nothing wrong and that woman engaged 100% (15 January; 2 RT, 2 F)

The #MeToo movement emits another death rattle, as its witch-hunt, mean-girl base is revealed. [...] (18 January; 1 F)

This category of users blurs into the next: users who are generally supportive of #MeToo, but again think that this case is taking the movement “too far”:

So here is the thing with situation about #AzizAnsari it feels like a huge slap in the face for the #MeToo movement in my opinion. Is there a line to cross? Is it turning into a witch hunt? Honestly the #MeToo movement is confusing me right now. (18 January)

The whole Aziz Ansari story is pushing the #MeToo campaign into dark waters. Sexual assault is not the next morning's regret. Some women are taking this too far and overriding the progress that has been made by the real victims. (19 January)

Like in the tweet above, the idea that #MeToo has “gone too far” is often accompanied by the use of the phrase “witch hunt” to describe the movement, which appears 16 times in the sample. In this sense, #MeToo is seen as shortcut taken by angry women who wish to attack men, again reflecting the trope of the “scored woman who weaponizes accusations of sexual violence as a means of serving revenge” (Hindes & Fileborn 2019:12):

The #MeToo movement has turned into nothing more than a women led witchhunt to punish men with whom women have had failed dates or flings with. The Aziz Ansari accusations attest to this: A girl crying foul after a date didn't go as she had envisioned. Such b.s. #FakeNews (17 January; 3 F)

Poor guy Aziz Ansari, dragged through the coals by this witch hunting #MeToo for having a night with a woman who didn't articulate her thoughts and expected him to read her mind once she got home & regretted it. Disgusting attempt to destroy someone's life. (15 January)

Numerous users believe that the Ansari episode is not serious enough to be considered a part of #MeToo. Because #MeToo had been constructed thus far as a movement against sexual violence and harassment, and because many users do not believe that this case classifies as sexual assault, as shown in the previous section, it follows that it falls outside the bounds of #MeToo:

I stand with Aziz Ansari, #istandwithaziz this is NOT what #MeToo is about, while i support the #MeToo movement, women should not trivialize it or use it as a revenge for a bad date. (17 January; 1 RT, 3 F)

This reasoning is often accompanied by comparing the Ansari story with other stories that are deemed legitimate parts of #MeToo. First, Ansari himself is compared to other “#MeToo men”, who represent actual abusers; the most frequently mentioned are Harvey Weinstein and Kevin Spacey. When contrasted to those of these men, Ansari's actions are deemed too harmless to belong in the same category:

This is ridiculous. While this wasn't a completely perfect sexual encounter, Aziz doesn't deserve to go down with the Harvey Weinsteins of this wor[ld]. #metoo [attached: link to the original Babe.net article] (18 January)

Can everyone just cut the rhetoric that Aziz Ansari is in the same bracket as Weinstein, Spacey et al? All nuance appears to have disappeared from discourse for the “all men are pigs #metoo” approach. (14 January; 1 F)

The second term of comparison is “the real #MeToo victims”. Unlike the famous men, these remain generally unnamed. These represent legitimate victims that, through the inclusion of the Ansari case in #MeToo, have their experience invalidated and cheapened:

[...] The point is right is right & wrong is wrong. This article was b.s as soon as it started. My heart goes out to real #MeToo victims & real men will continue to fight on their behalf but THIS ain't THAT. (14 January; 1 RT, 4 F)

One group of survivors who are explicitly named are the athletes who denounced the USA Gymnastics national team doctor Larry Nassar:

Watching 70 brave young gymnasts come forward PUBLICLY to confront the man who sexually abused them, I'm even more convinced that anonymously trashing @azizansari for what amounted to a bad date was really cowardly of “Grace” & grossly irresponsible of @k8oway & @babedotnet #MeToo (19 January; 3 F)

The comparison with other “#MeToo men” and with “real victims” is also made in the widely shared op-ed piece by Bari Weiss in the New York Times:

lumping [Ansari] in with the same movement that brought down men who ran movie studios and forced themselves on actresses, or the factory-floor supervisors who demanded sex from female workers, trivializes what #metoo first stood for. (Weiss 2018)

Another interesting ramification is related to the political weaponisation of #MeToo that emerged in the results presented in chapter 4. Because Ansari is seen as politically progressive, the accusations against him are used by both sides of the political spectrum to advance their interest in U.S. politics. Conservatives, who are generally

unsupportive of #MeToo overall, are both pleased and amused at the fact that this “liberal” movement has become so overreaching that it is now attacking its own members. These users also employ alt-right language, such as calling their opponents “libtards”<sup>38</sup> and “snowflakes”, and use racist slurs against Ansari:

Like everything the liberals do, they go to[o] far. The #metoo movement has been hijacked by ultra sensitive snowflakes and now Everyman that hits on a women is a sexual predator. Liberals ruin everything ... no matter what it is, they just ruin it. Aziz Ansari #Amjoy<sup>39</sup> (14 January; 3 RT, 13 F)

TFW<sup>40</sup> you know #MeToo is turning into an ugly witch hunt but want it to take down more unfunny leftist douche bags like Aziz Ansari before flaming out like Salem (14 January; 3 F)

For liberals, the innocuous nature of Ansari's actions represents a distraction from the more serious accusations against Donald Trump. They feel that some conservatives are only showing support for #MeToo because it allows them to attack a progressive man and draw attention away from allegations against their President:

I have a lot of issues with how the story came out, was written, etc. And I'm uneasy with equating the #AzizAnsari narrative with having a POTUS that paid porn stars to keep silent. There is a spectrum to what is coming out with #MeToo - I'm uneasy by equating it all as same. (14 January; 5 RT, 58 F)

Trumpkins<sup>41</sup> are jumping on the #MeToo Train cos Aziz Ansari is Muslim. They're blaming Progressives, Liberals and Democrats... yet refuse to call out Pussy Grabber #ShitholeTrump (14 January; 2 F)

Some users express concern that the Ansari case is ultimately damaging to the #MeToo movement. This is again a central point in Weiss' New York Times article, which describes the Ansari incident as “arguably the worst thing that has happened to the #metoo movement since it began in October” (Weiss 2018). On this point, users

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<sup>38</sup> Portmanteau of the words “liberal” and “retard”.

<sup>39</sup> Hashtag for AM Joy, a political talk show on MSNBC.

<sup>40</sup> “That feeling when”.

<sup>41</sup> Donald Trump supporters.

feel that the case moves the focus away from the fight against legitimate sexual violence, and transforms a rightful movement into a personal vendetta:

Regret vs assault and harassment. Destroying a man's life because he rejected her over the fact that she wanted more is where women will lose the #metoo #timesup battle. This is not empowerment. This is not feminism. This is revenge plain and simple. (15 January; 1 F)

This story does so much damage to the #metoo movement and the reputation of @azizansari . A man showing interest in sex with you does not equate to assault. [...] (14 January)

On the other hand, other users reject the idea that this case damages #MeToo, and instead see it as the natural evolution of the ongoing conversation around sexual violence:

The \*Grace/Aziz Ansari story is NOT the worst thing to happen to the #MeToo movement, as purported by some. It has advanced the conversation to where it always needed to go. It's not going to derail #MeToo & statements to the contrary are sensationalist. This is truth and reckoning. (18 January; 1 RT, 5 F)

The Ansari story feels like an evolution in the #MeToo conversation where we're not just talking about violence and outright abuse but the whole culture and conditioning around sex, entitlement, and consent. (15 January; 9 RT, 47 F)

On this point, users also feel that focusing on Ansari's individual behaviour is limiting, since violence and coercion are systemic issues:

the conversation is centered around 'is ansari the bad guy here' and 'was it rape' which works against #metoo ; it's not about one guy that we can write off, it's about the systemic and toxic notion about when there is or isn't consent (16 January; 1 F)

Users also recognise that the Ansari episode is qualitatively different from previous #MeToo cases, but they believe that it should equally be discussed in order to include a more accurate picture of all facets of sexual violence in the conversation. They also underline how behaviour such as Ansari's stems from unequal gendered power dynamics:

Ultimately I believe the Aziz Ansaris of the world need to be called out in equal measure bc otherwise we're painting a picture of sexual wrongdoing as being done solely by monsters when the point of #metoo is recognizing that all men have been guilty of some degree of misconduct (15 January; 3 F)

And I see the Ansari situation as different from what was being shared on #MeToo . Ansari is more about socialisation that teaches men anything they do to obtain sex is okay (that doesn't involve tying someone up or beating them). IT'S NOT. (18 January)

Some tweets explicitly underline how sexual violence is discursively constructed, and how #MeToo brings about a necessary public discussion in order to challenge and redraw the boundaries of the definition of sexual violence in a way that is more just and fair to survivors:

Why does the definition of #AzizAnsari 's actions matter? The legal definition of assault is of a system which most #survivors and #perps never participate. What he did was shitty. Can we just decide that coerced sex is unacceptable? #feminism #FridayFeeling #MeToo #TimesUp (19 January; 1 RT, 1 F)

That's where education comes in, where discussion need to happen, and where - in the Ansari case - lines were clearly crossed. I do think it's a disservice to this particular societal reckoning to disregard that important part of the #MeToo conversation. (17 January)

Unlike those who perceive the Ansari case as the signaling the end of the #MeToo movement, other users express the wish for the conversation to bring about real social change, and propose solutions to combat violence. Interestingly, all solutions offered remain the discursive realm; rather than proposing legal remedies, users talk about the need for a cultural change in sexual interactions, emphasising the role of consent:

The reason we're talking about Aziz Ansari is not because he needs to face professional or criminal repercussions, but because we want men to learn. We want men to do better, because we know they can. It's time. #MeToo (17 January; 1 RT, 1 F)

The Aziz Ansari story is the clearest reminder yet that we need to completely undo everything we've ever been taught about sexual interactions and move to a verbal consent model. This isn't an excuse for Aziz, but it's clear most people don't 'get' it. (14 January)

On this matter, it is also interesting that some users do not focus on the Ansari case as an individual or isolated incident that needs to be addressed, but they see it as a springboard for the #MeToo conversation to expand beyond criminal understandings of violence:

I feel like this Ansari story is the one we needed to push this whole #MeToo thing over the consciousness line: all men have likely failed to read signals that led to them sexually assaulting someone. All women have likely experienced something on that spectrum. It's systemic. (16 January)

I really cannot comprehend why people are so upset that the #MeToo conversation is expanding beyond workplace harassment, rape and assault. We need an examination of our society's broken attitudes towards sex and consent. We can contain multitudes. [attached: link to a video titled "Why everyone is talking about Grace's date with Aziz Ansari" on MSNBC.com] (18 January; 3 F)

## Chapter 6

### Twitter discourse on the Le Monde letter

The second case analysed is the open letter signed by over 100 French women criticising #MeToo. The letter was originally published in Le Monde on 9 January 2018 with the headline “*«Nous défendons une liberté d'importuner, indispensable à la liberté sexuelle»*” (Chiche et al. 2018). The letter was co-written by five French women<sup>42</sup> and signed by over 100 women, mostly creative professionals. The most internationally prominent signatory was actress Catherine Deneuve; the letter thus became most closely associated with her in media coverage, where she was often portrayed as the primary creator and spokeswoman for the initiative. As a result, users in the sample often centre her in their messages or direct their comments at her. Following some criticisms of the letter, Deneuve herself issued an apology to survivors of sexual assault who might have been offended by its content, but otherwise re-stated her support for the initiative (Deneuve 2018).

The main message of the letter is that #MeToo has gone too far and “led to a climate of totalitarian society”. According to the authors, while the Harvey Weinstein accusations triggered “a legitimate awakening about the sexual violence that women are subjected to”, the campaign quickly degenerated into an attack on men, women, and sexual freedom. They contend that #MeToo is animated by a “hatred of men” and that it unfairly targets them for harmless sexual acts. Additionally, it relies on puritan morals that reduce women to the “status of eternal victim” and “to defenseless preys of male chauvinist demons”. As the headline sums up, they call for greater individual

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<sup>42</sup> Sarah Chiche (writer/psychoanalyst), Catherine Millet (author/art critic), Catherine Robbe-Grillet (actress/writer), Peggy Sastre (author/journalist) and Abnousse Shalmani (writer/journalist).

empowerment in sexual relations, since “the freedom to say 'no' to a sexual proposition cannot exist without the freedom to bother”.

The letter represents one of the most clearly articulated and publicised examples of backlash against #MeToo. It was widely disseminated by news outlets. The letter can be understood as a fundamentally conservative action aimed at undoing the social transformation brought about by #MeToo. By January 2018, it was clear that #MeToo had generated some kind of cultural shift, and the authors aim to push back against what they perceive to be a new cultural climate. Like the Ansari case, the French letter also drew highly polarised responses from Twitter users.

To examine these responses, 1434 tweets were selected and analysed from the time period 9-15 January 2018. Reflecting the international reach of the discussion, a variety of languages is present in the dataset. The majority of tweets (65%) are in English, while 18% are in French. Other significant languages include Spanish (7,5%), German (4,6%), Dutch (2,6%) and Italian (2,2%). 52% of tweets contain external URLs.

The content analysis generated 27 thematic codes. The number of codes is lower than the analysis for the Babe.net story because in this case many users simply tweeted a headline or link to a news story on the letter, without adding their own commentary, thus making the discussion less articulate. Like in the previous chapter, a preliminary outline of all codes is provided below (Table 11). The codes were then re-organised into wider themes on the basis of their significance for the present study. These are illustrated in the rest of this chapter.

*Table 11. Overview of all codes for the Le Monde story*

#### **Significance of the Le Monde letter**

- User’s stance on the letter
  - User sides with letter
  - User criticises letter
    - Ageist comments
- Letter is an expression of a generational divide
- Letter is an expression of French cultural specificity

- Contrast between France and Anglo-Saxon world
- Letter is an expression of privilege
  - Quotes the “metro” passage
- Letter is conservative
- Letter is misogynistic
- Letter expresses rational / common sense positions
- Finally rebelling against hegemonic discourse
- Solidarity with sexual violence survivors
- Need to properly define sexual harassment
  - Quotes the Roman Polanski passage

#### **Implications for #MeToo and wider cultural climate**

- Men are the real victims
- #MeToo activists are “feminazi”
- #MeToo victims are opportunists
- #MeToo positions women as victims
- #MeToo is hysterical
- #MeToo is lynching
- #MeToo is puritanical
- User defends #MeToo
- Right wing politics
- Role of feminism
- Need to open up a conversation

### **1. Defining sexual violence, defining #MeToo**

One of the key points in the French letter is the need to set clear boundaries for sexual violence. Indeed, the first line of the letter is “Rape is a crime. But trying to pick up someone, however persistently or clumsily, is not — nor is gallantry an attack of machismo” (Cliche et al. 2018). Aiming to revert the current #MeToo discourse, the French authors are re-stating a binary understanding of sexual violence, drawing clear lines between rape and harmless flirting. This point proves especially contentious in the Twitter conversation. Some users welcome the distinction made in the letter, distinguishing between rape and other types of sexual interaction:

Soutien à Catherine #Deneuve car draguer n'est pas agresser. Dans cette parution, le viol est dénoncer comme un crime. Il y a une mode du féminisme qui peut devenir ridicule (cf. écriture inclusive). On est dans une société qui s'américanise[e]. Danger. #MeToo #BalanceTonPorc (10 January; 1 F)

[Support for Catherine Deneuve because trying to pick someone up is not assault. In this publication, rape is denounced as a crime. There is a kind of feminism that can become ridiculous (see inclusive writing). Our society is Americanising. Danger. #MeToo #BalanceTonPorc]

Other users express confusion at the idea put forward in the letter that #MeToo is calling for a blurring of the definition of sexual violence. They argue that it is the authors of the letter who are blurring the boundaries, since they are misrepresenting the true nature of #MeToo:

Les auteurs de la #TribuneDuMOnde expliquent qu'on ne devrait pas interdire les propositions sexuelles... Mais À QUEL MOMENT les mouvements #BalanceTonPorc #MeToo et/ou #TIMESUP ont souhaité faire interdire la DRAGUE ou abroger la LIBERTÉ ? Ces femmes mélangent TOUT. #CaVous<sup>43</sup> (10 January; 8 RT, 26 F) [The authors of the Le Monde letter explain that we should not forbid sexual advances... but when did the #BalanceTonPorc, #MeToo and/or #TimesUp try to forbid flirting or to abolish freedom? These women mix everything up. #CaVous]

Have men been forced out of jobs for touching a knee or for trying to steal a kiss due to #metoo, #BalanceTonPorc ? Curious. And come on, Deneuve, those flirtations are problematic in the workplace. #TimesUp [...] (10 January; 1 F)

Most notably, users attempt to put forward their own definitions of sexual violence, seeking criteria for what constitutes sexual violence and problematic behaviour. Some point to power relations as the key defining element of sexual violence, calling into question dynamics that are absent in the letter's arguments. These users rely on the classic feminist notion of rape as a matter of violence and domination rather than

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<sup>43</sup> Hashtag for C à vous, a talk show on the channel France 5.

sexuality (Brownmiller 1975). In this way, they are highlighting the central role of power relations in determining the role of consent in sexual behaviour:

Catherine Deneuve, Rape is not about sexuality, but about power and domination. A woman should be able to rebuff a man without reprisal. That's not puritanical, it's humanity. You're simplifying a complex subject. #MeToo[,] A Woman (10 January)

Flirting is a two-sided game. Harassment is not. Specially when you have two people in very unequal positions of power. That is what #MeToo is about. Not some amateur, clumsy, innocent high school drama. #CatherineDeneuve (@NegarMortazavi, 11 January; 16 RT, 90 F)

In a similar vein, some users also attempt to subvert the letter's contention that #MeToo is an attack on sexual freedom. They conceptualise sexual freedom as steeped in equal gender relations and meaningful consent. In their view, then, the #MeToo fight against sexual violence and harassment also serves the purpose of creating a more sexually free and egalitarian society:

Wer dafür kämpft, dass sexuelle Belästigung aufhört, kämpft nicht gegen, sondern FÜR sexuelle Freiheit. Wo Frauen permanent um ihre körperliche und physische Integrität fürchten müssen, kann es keine sexuelle Freiheit geben. #deneuve #metoo (@corinnamilborn, 15 January; 73 RT 373 F)

[Whoever fights to end sexual harassment is not fighting against, but FOR sexual freedom. Where women constantly fear for their physical and physical integrity, there can be no sexual freedom. #deneuve #metoo]

The #metoo movement does not repress sexual expression, #CatherineDeneuve . They allow women and men to have a place to speak out. Sexual freedom exists as long as it is between two consenting adults. When there is a power structure in the workplace there cannot be true consent. (10 January)

Another strategy that users adopt to rebuke the letter is invoking their own experiences with sexual harassment. They follow the #MeToo initiative of sharing their stories in order to argue how, based on their subjective perception of the experience, certain behaviours should be classified as harassment. In this sense they

challenge top-down definitions of violence, and use their own understanding in order to advance the legitimacy of their experience:

Wow, this is just insane. I'm French and support the #meToo movement. There's a serious difference between clumsy flirting and harassment! I'm shocked that women could actually say that. I've suffered from unrequired insistent flirting and trust me, I felt harassed. Shame on you! (10 January)

#CatherineDeneuve I grew up in Paris. As teens, my friends and I were harassed and molested in public, constantly. No adults believed us. It was not flirtation, it was not sexy. It was scary and humiliating. It needs to end. #BalanceTonPorc [attached: link to a news article titled "Catherine Deneuve and Others Denounce the #MeToo Movement" on the New York Times website] (10 January; 1 RT 1 F)

The same approach is also used by two of the news media articles (Collins 2018; Kipnis 2018), where the authors recount personal stories of harassment in order to challenge what they perceive to be a dismissal of their experiences by the Le Monde letter:

I tell the story of being groped this summer in order to establish that I'm sympathetic to the idea that women can move on quickly from lesser instances of sexual harassment and assault. They can; I did. But I'm not so willfully unaware of the spectrum of human temperament and circumstance to ignore a woman's right to be traumatized by an incident like the one that happened to me. (Collins 2018)

In a similar way, some users also emphasise the need to listen to the experiences of other survivors in order to define sexual violence. They oppose the content of the letter because it constructs its own particular version of #MeToo while ignoring the content of the stories shared by survivors; this is perceived as offensive and tone-deaf:

Honte au @lemondefr d'avoir publié cette ridicule tribune des 100 crétines réacs qui n'écoutent pas les victimes[.] Le mouvement #BalanceTonPorc fait parfaitement la différence entre la drague et l'agression C'est un mvment mondial pr aider femmes agressées et pour qu'on LES ÉCOUTE

[Shame on Le Monde for publishing this ridiculous letter by 100 reactionary idiots who don't listen to victims. The #BalanceTonPorc movement perfectly differentiates between pick up and assault. It is a global movement to help assaulted women and to LISTEN TO THEM] (10 January; 1 RT, 4 F)

Catherine Deneuve und 99 Mitunterzeichnerinnen setzen sich für die 'Freiheit ein, lästig zu sein (oder zu belästigen)'. Eine schallende Ohrfeige für die vielen Frauen, die belästigt, missbraucht und vergewaltigt wurden. Nein, Frau Deneuve, Sie sind auf dem Holzweg. #MeToo (10 January; 11 RT, 48 F)

[Catherine Deneuve and 99 co-signatories advocate the 'Freedom to molest (or to be molested)'. A resounding slap in the face for the many women who have been molested, abused and raped. No, Ms. Deneuve, you are on the wrong track. #MeToo]

One of the main criticisms directed at the authors of the letter is that they are speaking from a place of privilege, and thus are unable to fully comprehend the power relations at play in cases of sexual violence:

Not all woman have the financial freedom Ms.Deneuve and “We’re All That Boys!”<sup>44</sup> women have to fight back. As a matter of fact, VERY FEW DO. For a single mom, if its between feeding children and demanding dignity, children win every time. #cdnpoli #MeToo [attached: link to the article by DiManno (2018)] (13 January; 1 F)

A similar point is made by Van Badham in her Guardian column, highlighting how unequal power relations affect interpersonal relationships:

“Sexual liberty” is the right to determine your own sexual behavior, without coercion. Dare I suggest that those of us who have lived without power and status perhaps understand this with a greater keenness of experience than those who have?

Imagine inhabiting such a world of privilege that the fantasy of superiority becomes real to you. [...] Just ask the Deneuve group, who have added their voices to the claim that there is a “witch-hunt” out to get the poor, marginalized and oppressed male sexual predators of the world. (Badham 2018)

One point in the letter that draws specific criticism is the suggestion that a woman might not “feel forever traumatized by a man who rubs himself against her in the

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<sup>44</sup> Reference is unclear.

subway, even if that is regarded as an offense”, and that she might “consider this act as the expression of a great sexual deprivation, or even as a non-event” (Cliche et al. 2018). This is perceived by some users as epitomising the authors' oblivious privilege, since they present an everyday situation that, users assume, they are not familiar with, given their celebrity lifestyle. Consequently, their opinions on the subject are seen as insignificant and ill-advised, since they have no familiarity or authority on the situations that “regular” women face:

Madame Deneuve reclame le droit d etre importunée.. euh on parle bien de cette bourgeoise qui sort accompagnée de garde du corps et qui n a surement pas mis les pieds dans le metro depuis 1000 ans! #balancetonporc (10 January; 6 RT, 21 F)

[Madame Deneuve is reclaiming the right to be bothered... We are talking about this bourgeois who is escorted by bodyguards and who has definitely not set foot in the metro in 100 years! #balancetonporc]

Merci @MarleneSchiappa<sup>45</sup> --> le triomphe du bon sens. À l'évidence, les auteur.e.s de la tribune du Monde n'ont pas pris le Noctilien à 1h du matin ni galéré à se débarrasser d'un homme insistant depuis longtemps... #Balancetonporc (10 January; 1 F)

[Thank you @MarleneSchiappa --> the triumph of common sense. Clearly, the authors of the Le Monde letter have never taken the night bus at 1 in the morning or struggled to get rid of a persistent man in a long time... #Balancetonporc]

This point is particularly interesting because, as outlined in chapter 3, one of the criticisms that has most commonly been directed at the #MeToo movement is that it favours the voices of famous, privileged women. Here, instead, #MeToo is generally understood as having common women's best interests at heart, in contrast with the detached cluelessness of the French authors. As a result, users call out the authors of

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<sup>45</sup> Marlène Schiappa, France's Secretary of Equality between women and men at the time, publicly criticised the Le Monde letter and especially the metro comment (Toussay 2018).

the letter for their misogyny and attack on women's rights, while expressing their support for #MeToo:

No surprise coming from that privileged group of misogynist women. Of course they published w/Le Monde. Take a hike, ladies. Not interested in your guilt tripping & shushing. I'm standing with #MeToo & #TIMESUP despite their flaws, women will get better mileage w/them than w/out. (9 January)

Mujeres francesas y blancas de alto estatus social dando lecciones sobre seducción vs. acoso. Eso es lo que yo veo aquí. Una carta que, en nombre de la libertad sexual, legitima la supremacía cultural y de raza #MeToo #Deneuve (10 January; 1 RT, 2 F)

[White French women of high social status are giving lectures on seduction vs. harassment. This is what I see here. A letter which, in the name of sexual freedom, legitimises cultural and racial supremacy #MeToo #Deneuve]

Another element of the letter that is taken to symbolise the authors' privilege is the mention of the protests that took place in October 2017 against a Roman Polanski retrospective at the Cinémathèque Française (cf. chapter 3). In the letter, these protests are cited as part of a “purging wave” against male artists; additionally, Catherine Deneuve had expressed her support for Polanski on previous occasions (Larcher 2017). In some users' view, defending Polanski represents an indication of the authors' lack of understanding of sexual assault, exposing the confused definition of varying degrees of sexual violence in the letter. They also underline, again, the authors' incapability to prioritise the right of women over their celebrity privilege:

Catherine Deneuve supports male privilege to such an extreme degree she defended Roman Polanski's right to rape kids and get away with it. So of course she's going to disagree with #metoo - and of course an evil alt-righter like Sommers is going to agree with her<sup>46</sup>. (10 January; 1 RT, 1 F)

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<sup>46</sup> Reference to Christina Sommers, an American author who espouses “individualist feminism” and who expressed support for the French letter (Willscher 2018).

Ironic. Defending ROMAN POLANSKI in the same open letter that reduces the #MeToo movement down to “stolen kisses” and “sexually charged text messages” is exactly why #MeToo exists. #CatherineDeneuve [attached: a screenshot of the Le Monde letter highlighting the sentence mentioning Polanski] (11 January; 6 F)

As a result, some users express support for the #MeToo movement, which they believe has been misinterpreted in the letter. They provide their own definition of the scope of #MeToo with the aim of presenting it as a reasonable, legitimate movement in contrast with the view expressed in the letter:

\*reads NYT article by Catherine Deneuve\* To all the women who signed this petition, Do some research before you attach yourself to this stupidity. #MeToo has nothing to do with flirting. It's about sexual harassment, abuse, and rape. Ps: [attached: animated GIF of Beyoncé waving her hand with the caption “GIRL, BYE”] (10 January; 3 F)

The #metoo movement does not repress sexual expression, #CatherineDeneuve . They allow women and men to have a place to speak out. Sexual freedom exists as long as it is between two consenting adults. When there is a power structure in the workplace there cannot be true consent. (10 January)

## **2. Criticisms of #MeToo**

In the letter, some of the most common criticisms of #MeToo are articulated, such as the idea that a legitimate movement has turned into a “witch-hunt” and that it has become weaponised by angry women who are acting irrationally. As a result, the letter resonates with some users who generally share the French women's concerns about the “new” ideas #MeToo has brought forward:

Catherine Deneuve est encensée sur les sites étrangers comme le DailyMail, des milliers de commentaires pour saluer cette tribune et les délires #MeToo ou #BalanceTonPorc et le féminisme haineux. #cdanslair<sup>47</sup> (10 January 03) [Catherine Deneuve is being praised on foreign websites like the DailyMail, with thousands of comments applauding this letter and the #MeToo or #BalanceTonPorc frenzy and hateful feminism. #cdanslair]

French women have taken a slightly different stance/approach on #metoo & it's worth sharing. Rape is a crime, but trying to seduce someone, even persistently or cack-handedly, is not -- nor is being gentlemanly a macho attack. We do need clearer lines. (11 January; 3 F)

Some users feel that the French letter is bringing some much-needed nuance into the #MeToo debate. They feel that the conversation has taken on an extremist tone and the letter is seen as counteracting this with more moderate, “common sense” opinions:

Et si #BalanceTonPorc et la tribune signée par Deneuve n'étaient pas incompatibles fondamentalement. Pourquoi les opposer à ce point ? Il y a 2 réalités certaines, peut-on l'admettre véritablement ? (Je pose la question comme ça, c'est vrai, n'étant pas une femme...) (10 January)

[What if #BalanceTonPorc and the letter signed by Deneuve are not fundamentally incompatible[?] Why should they be opposed? There are certainly two realities, can we admit it? (I am posing the question like this, since I am not a woman...)]

I see the point. If #metoo was a gauge needle on a dashboard, 0 could be everyone ignoring the problem. That's rectified. 100 would be viewing a hello or a query as sexual harassment. That's not made clear. Deneuve & the French artists have recalibrated the needle midway. (10 January; 1 F)

In an interesting contrast, some users praise the bravery of the signatories for speaking out in the letter. In their view, #MeToo is perceived as embodying the dominant paradigm of political correctness that is prevalent in society, and the signatories of the letter are lone voices that go against the tide by voicing unpopular opinions:

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<sup>47</sup> Hashtag for C dans l'air, a news programme on the channel France 5.

Enfin des voix qui s'élèvent et refusent de hurler avec les loups. Catherine Deneuve, Catherine Millet et les 99 signataires de la tribune de @lemondefr dénoncent justement la calomnie, le lynchage, la volonté de nuire et le puritanisme rampant de #balancetonporc [attached: link to a news article titled "Catherine Millet et Catherine Deneuve dénoncent le "puritanisme" apparu après l'affaire Weinstein" on Le Huffington Post website] (9 January; 23 RT, 50 F)

[Finally some voices that are speaking out and refusing to run with the pack. Catherine Deneuve, Catherine Millet and the 99 signatories of the Le Monde letter are rightfully denouncing the libel, the lynching, the willful harm and puritanism of #balancetonporc]

@deadmacris ahi empezaron a llorar porque deneuve no quiere plegarse al discurso hegemónico del #metoo (11 January)

[There, they have started crying because Deneuve does not want to bend to the hegemonic discourse of #metoo]

Supporters of the letter find that the text articulates some of the most widespread criticisms of #MeToo as a movement. Many users believe that #MeToo embodies a form of feminism that has gone too far and is unjustly targeting all men. This is evident, for example, by the association of #MeToo with the word "feminazi":

So a woman with common sense that states the obvious like innocent until proven guilty and flirting is not rape is being eviscerated by the feminazis. Who saw that coming? #CatherineDeneuve #MeToo (11 January; 2 F)

There are real victims of sexual harassments, but the #MeToo crowds are hijacking the momentum to expand Feminazism. This is no more about harassment. It's about emasculating the male species. I agree with Ms. Deneuve completely. (10 January; 2 F)

Similarly, words like "hysteria" and "lynching" are used to describe #MeToo and the women who speak out through the movement:

finally, someone has started to end the #MeToo hysteria nonsense... thanks to #CatherineDeneuve for putting things in proper perspective [attached: link to a news article titled “Catherine Deneuve Signs Open Letter Denouncing ‘Me Too’ Movement as ‘Witch-Hunt’” on the Rolling Stone website] (11 January; 1 F)

French woman absolutely spot on. Many men have been wrongly victimized & banged in prison by lying, dishonest, deranged women stirred up by d inane, hysterical #MeToo campaign [...]

This imagery is also present in the article by Rosie DiManno that appeared in The Star:

What began as a cri de coeur from the victimized — these are mostly preyed-upon women, but also some men, because sexual shanking is not exclusive to any gender — has morphed into rabble-rousing and pitch-forking and social media shaming. (DiManno 2018)

In a few instances, this discourse is appropriated by nationalist and anti-Islamic commentators. The original letter makes a brief reference to “religious extremists”, who are grouped with “enemies of sexual freedom” and “reactionaries” (Chiche et al. 2018). While users do not explicitly quote this passage, some of them see #MeToo as part of a wider trend of foreign influences that are damaging French culture. The “excessive” feminism of #MeToo and #balancetonporc is likened to Islam as a religion that restricts women's freedom and harms French values:

@onrefaitlemonde les extrémistes de #balancetonporc devraient se rendre compte qu'elles valident la thèse des pires islamistes mettant les femmes sous une burka pour les protéger des hommes qui ne sont que des porcs libidineux (9 January)

[The #balancetonporc extremists must realise that they are validating the ideas of the worst Islamists by putting women under a burka to protect them from men who are all libidinous pigs]

Il faut que des voix continuent de s'élever comme celles d' #AlainDelon #CatherineDeneuve #LaetitiaCasta et d'autres pour lutter contre ce gouvernement en pleine dégénérescence de #Macron et sa clique qui tuent notre belle France #balancetonporc #immigration #islam #hyperfeminisme (13 January; 2 RT, 2 F)

[Voices such as Alain Delon's, Catherine Deneuve's, Letitia Casta's and others must continue to speak out to fight against the disintegrating government of Macron and his clique who are killing our beautiful France.]

One of the points in the letter that most resonates with users is the idea that #MeToo has turned into a war against all men; the letter repeatedly states how men are now being unfairly targeted for harmless behaviour:

In fact, #MeToo has led to a campaign, in the press and on social media, of public accusations and indictments against individuals who, without being given a chance to respond or defend themselves, are put in the exact same category as sex offenders. This summary justice has already had its victims: men who've been disciplined in the workplace, forced to resign, and so on, when their only crime was to touch a woman's knee, try to steal a kiss, talk about "intimate" things during a work meal, or send sexually-charged messages to women who did not return their interest. (Chiche et al. 2018)

On this point, like in the Ansari case, users feel that the #MeToo movement has given women a sudden and excessive power which they are wielding to attack men. As a result, men are often portrayed as the "real victims" and those who are suffering the most from this recent empowerment of women. The concept of "himpathy" (Manne 2018) is again useful to understand how these discourses aim to prioritise the defence of men:

Bravo #CatherineDeneuve. Nous devons dire aux #hommes - qui sont bien mal menés en ce moment -qu'on les aime, maladroits, séducteurs ou machos. contre #MeTooWhatNext #metoo movement (9 January; 1 F)

[Well done Catherine Deneuve. We must tell men - who are treated very badly at the moment - that we love them, whether they are awkward, seducers or machos. Against #MeTooWhatNext #metoo movement]

Merci Catherine #Deneuve de redonner de l'audience médiatique à la cause masculine! Parce que tous les hommes sont loin d'être tous des porcs et que les connasses ça existe aussi #balancetatruie<sup>48</sup> #balancetonporc [...] (11 January)

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<sup>48</sup> "Expose your sow".

[Thank you Catherine Deneuve for giving a media audience to the male cause! Because all men are far from being all pigs and because bitches exist too]

Some users take this argument further by claiming that the women who participate in #MeToo do not actually have any experience of “legitimate” sexual assault – a point which does not appear in the original letter. According to these users, these women are opportunists who have used their sexuality to their own advantage, and thus have no right to participate in #MeToo:

Débat Je suis pour cette tribune car j'ai tjrs été contré le hashtag #BalanceTonPorc car il y a eu plus de vengeance de petites salopes que de vrais harcèlement sexuel Donc bravo a Catherine, Brigitte [attached: link to a news article titled “Des femmes, dont Deneuve, à contre-courant de l'indignation née de l'affaire Weinstein” on the Libération website (10 January; 1 F)

[Debate: I support this letter because I've always been against the hashtag #BalanceTonPorc because there has been more revenge by little whores than real sexual harassment. So well done to Catherine, Brigitte etc.]

#CatherineDeneuve and her friends are so right about #MeToo A witchhunt started by a bunch of hypocrites who could have kept their pride and say NO( assault & rape are still a crime) but instead chose to f\*ck their way to fame & fortune. (9 January; 18 RT, 41 F)

### **3. #MeToo as a generational and national divide**

The controversy generated by the letter and the heated public debate that followed are often interpreted by making reference to two broad categories of overlapping explanations: as a generational conflict and as an issue of French national culture.

Users frame the polarisation of the debate as a generational divide. Some users are open-minded in trying to understand this contrast as a difference in values between older generation of feminists, represented by the authors of the letter, and the younger

#MeToo activists. In this sense, users acknowledge that #MeToo has brought on a new mentality that contrasts the views of older generations:

I thought Catherine Deneuve's criticisms of #MeToo were cultural, but given this Atlantic piece, I'm more inclined to see it as a generational schism. (15 January)

Interesting attempt to see into generational differences on the French women rejecting #MeToo : "I wonder if those of us who were born later, who are fighting other battles, often underestimate the primacy of sexual liberation in the world view of previous generations." [attached: link to the article by Collins (2018)] (11 January)

As it emerges from the last tweet quoting the article by Lauren Collins (2018) in the New Yorker, the generational divide framework is also widely present in the media articles:

Although there is a range of ages represented among the women, there is something of a generational tinge to the discussion. They object to the imposition of new rules on established figures. (Collins 2018)

There's also a generational divide. Older feminists remember the freewheeling days of the sexual lib of Helen Gurley Brown's *Cosmopolitan*, which encouraged women to flirt with their bosses as a form of empowerment. Younger feminists, even if they've been sexting since middle school, have a more highly developed sense of workplace boundaries and what constitutes sexual harassment. (Donadio 2018)

It is noticeable that Deneuve, as the most prominent woman among the signatories, was 74 at the time of publication; however, the five authors of the letter were of varying ages: Sastre, Shalmanim and Chiche were in their late 30s and early 40s, while Millet was 69 and Robbe-Grillet was 87. The generational conflict is therefore at least in part a cultural construction that stems from how users perceive the values espoused in the letter and those of #MeToo activists. Indeed, some users map the generational conflict onto the other types of conflict that were previously described; most notably, some users see the letter as an expression of the privilege of an older generation, who take on a condescending tone while being oblivious to the real problems women face:

Respect to Miss Deneuve, but she's clearly living in a different, a much privileged bubble of her own. She and those women have completely missed the point of #MeToo She is, clearly a figure stuck in the beliefs of the French New Wave. (11 January)

Women like Catherine Deneuve are the type of white women my grandmother side-eyed in the movement because they always centered their white privilege above gender inequity which made them a threat to liberation. Talk about it. #TIMESUP #MeToo (10 January; 1 RT, 8 F)

A group of around 30 feminists, led by politician Caroline De Haas, published a counter-letter where they compare the signatories of the Le Monde letter to “the annoying colleague or the tiresome uncle who doesn’t understand what’s happening” (Collins 2018). This comment was widely picked up by the media and is quoted often in the Twitter sample. Some more extreme users even adopt ageist language against Deneuve and the other signatories to discredit their views:

Deneuve is a senile old goat who no longer gets laid: she only wishes men would still hit on her like in her glorious past. Being a wealthy AF<sup>49</sup>, white celebrity has her disconnected from reality. She and her cronies are no accurate representation of France. #MeToo #BalanceTonPorc @MrErnestOwens (11 January)

Sad to see how the ageing actress #CatherineDeneuve , with her face cracking up, is seeking publicity at any cost by equalising #rape and #sexualharassment with #flirt. Loss of memory? #MeeToo #BalanceTonPorc [attached: two photos of Deneuve side by side, one from her youth and one from the present day] (10 January; 11 RT, 22 F).

In contrast, those who support the letter do so precisely because they feel that #MeToo has brought about a new mentality which they deem excessive. They share the letter's call to a return to a previous generation of common-sense attitudes toward harassment and violence:

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<sup>49</sup> “as fuck”.

Merci aux féministes de 2e vague d'écraser celles de 3e. Le #metoo et autres #balance ton porc ne servent en rien les victimes. Ne mettons pas sur un même pied le pelotage dans le métro (certes intolérable) et le viol. Merci @catherinedeneuve et les autres. (10 January)

[Thank you to second-wave feminists for crushing third-wave feminists. #MeToo and #Balancetonporc do nothing for victims. Let's not put on the same level rubbing in the metro (certainly intolerable) and rape. Thank you Catherine Deneuve and the others.]

Another line of interpretation for the polarisation of arguments has to do with the fact that the authors of the letter are French; the message of the letter is therefore often interpreted, both by users and in the media, as stemming from specific French cultural characteristics. Both those who support and those who oppose the letter argue that their position somehow stems from some kind of French cultural specificity. Opponents see France as a country where misogyny is rampant, and the letter as an expression of this misogyny:

[...] Catherine Deneuve is SO OLD! And misogyny in France is well known. ALL women should support other women instead of putting them down and keep objectifying themselves. #metoo #wakeup (10 January; 1 F)

Condemnation of #metoo campaign by the 10 french actresses is a betrayal of women of France who are constantly fighting the inherent sexism known to be widespread in French society. Badly done ladies (10 January; 1 RT, 3 F)

Conversely, supporters of the letter believe that #MeToo goes against French cultural values and thus see the letter as defending French society. France is associated with stereotypes about romance and seduction, whilst #MeToo is seen as imposing foreign American values:

Stop au #feminisme absurde défendue par des femmes aussi féminines que des #DOCKERS<sup>50</sup>. La #France est le pays de l' #amour , de la #séduction , de la #dragage. #CatherineDeneuve incarne cette #France, #CatherineMillet a su l'écrire #BalanceTonPorc #metoo #BalanceTaTruie #TribuneDuMonde (10 January)

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<sup>50</sup> Dockers is a brand of men's clothing.

[Stop to the absurd feminism defended by women who are as feminine as Dockers. France is the country of love, seduction, flirting. Catherine Deneuve embodies this France, Catherine Millet has been able to describe it #BalanceTonPorc #metoo #BalanceTaTrueie #TribuneDuMonde].

Why is it obvious to French women that the #MeToo movement is about getting women to push away the men in their lives & act like they're empowering themselves by destroying everything, but not American women? (11 January)

The view that the letter is an expression of French cultural specificity is perhaps the most widely argued point in the media articles. For example, the same declaration by one of the signatories, Anne-Elisabeth Moutet, is quoted in two articles:

“We are talking here about destroying all the ambiguity and the charm of relationships between men and women,” explained the writer Anne-Elisabeth Moutet, who signed the letter, on the BBC. “We are French, we believe in gray areas. America is a different country. They do things in black and white and make very good computers. We don't think human relationships should be treated like that.” [...] “In America, love is mentioned almost only through hygienic terms. Sensuality is accepted only in a rational way, which is another way of refusing it.” (Poirier 2018; the same quote appears in Di Manno 2018)

Similarly, in her *New Yorker* piece, Agnès C. Poirier sums up both the French/American feminism and the generational conflict that the *Le Monde* letter brings to light:

Call it a cliché if you like, but ours is a culture that, for better and for worse, views seduction as a harmless and pleasurable game, dating back to the days of medieval “amour courtois.” As a result, there has been a kind of harmony between the sexes that is particularly French. This does not mean that sexism doesn't exist in France — of course it does. It also doesn't mean we don't disapprove of the actions of men like Mr. Weinstein. What it does mean is that we are wary of things that might disturb this harmony.

And in the past 20 years or so, a new French feminism has emerged — an American import. It has embraced this rather alien brand of anti-men paranoia that Ms. de Beauvoir described; it took control of #metoo in France, and this same form of feminism has been very vocal against the Deneuve letter. (Poirier 2018)

## Chapter 7

### Discussion of findings

This chapter brings together the quantitative results described in chapter 4 and the results from the thematic analysis described in chapters 5 and 6. It identifies and illustrates six key and interrelated themes emerging from the research and provides an overarching discussion of the significance and implications of these findings.

#### 1. Media logics and Twitter publics

Building on the discussion of Twitter publics presented in chapter 4, new understandings of the #MeToo publics can be put forward on the basis of the qualitative findings.

First, the #MeToo Twitter public can also be understood as an *issue public* which is “animated by acute controversies [...] around a given issue”; controversial discussions on social media are “given an extra boost of energy by algorithmic curation models” (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández 2016:82). This definition is useful because it brings together a number of elements that constitute the discussion that was analysed. It has been observed how controversies can be generated both from new media (the website Babe.net) and traditional media (Le Monde). In both cases, the central issues were picked up by Twitter users and turned into social media controversy. In turn, this controversy is also amplified by the social media logic that propels attention-generating content. A connection can therefore be drawn with the concept of “acute events” (Bruns et al. 2016) that emerged from the quantitative analysis of tweets (chapter 4), since this qualitative part of the study helps understand how this type of controversies generate sharp increases in social media activity.

Second, and relatedly, the participation of users in #MeToo can be understood with the concept of *affective publics* (Papacharissi 2015), deriving from the essential concept of *affect* introduced in chapter 2. These are defined as “networked publics that are mobilized and connected, identified, and potentially disconnected through expressions of sentiment” (Papacharissi 2015:125). In her study of the 2011 protests in Egypt, Papacharissi describes how Twitter users “felt their own way into that particular event by contributing to a stream that blended emotion, drama, opinion, and news in a manner that departed from the conventional deliberative logic and aligned with the softer structure of affect worlds” (Papacharissi 2015:117). A similar blend of content and feelings can be observed in the discussion in the two Twitter samples analysed. In this sense, this type of online conversations move away from the traditional, idealised model of a rational public sphere. Instead it allows individuals to “tune into an issue” (Papacharissi 2015:118) in a more immediate and flexible manner, free from the organisational and identarian constraints of traditional political engagement (cf. Bennett & Segerberg 2012).

One of the ways in which this affective intensity manifests itself in the case studies is the often extreme polarisation of the opinions expressed by Twitter users. As it was shown, many take a firm stand either in favour of or against the contentious issues at hand, while nuanced opinions are less frequent. Both the Babe.net article and the Le Monde letter aimed to be polemical and to trigger controversy in the public, albeit in different manners.

In this sense, the qualitative findings confirm the conceptualisation of #MeToo as a culture war that was sketched in Chapter 4. The expression of highly polarised views on social media can be understood as “culture wars discourse”, that is “discourse that uses a more-or-less standardised set of simple binary constructs<sup>51</sup> [...] to caricature and reframe complex issues as a struggle between a virtuous ‘we’ and demonic ‘they’”

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<sup>51</sup> These binaries include “orthodox versus progressive; conservative versus liberal; mainstream versus elite; common sense versus intellectual; truth versus relativism; moral versus immoral; individualist versus collective; libertarian versus communist; freedom versus totalitarianism; suburban versus inner city; self-sufficient versus rent-seeking; virtuous versus permissive; and so on” (Davis 2019:3).

(Davis 2019:3). This is especially evident in the text of the Le Monde letter, which clearly pictures a “demonic 'they'” in the “extremist” #MeToo activists who wish to take away romance, seduction and sex, while the authors depict themselves as promoters of common sense and moderate opinions.

The Babe.net article, on the other hand, is more nuanced in tone; it was its subject matter that proved contentious for the public. It has been argued that the decision to publish the article was due to a precise wish to be controversial and to draw attention to the website, rather than to make a situation of potential injustice public. In particular, the Babe.net piece is revealing of how the media industry attempted to capitalise on the #MeToo moment. Salter (2019) reconstructs Babe.net's questionable journalistic and editorial practices with regard to the Ansari article:

It emerged that Grace did not approach Babe.net but that Babe.net had heard rumors about Ansari and spoke to several people in their efforts to find Grace and convince her to speak publicly (Stelter, 2018). The interview and fact-checking of the story took place within the same week that the article was published, and Ansari was only given six hours to respond before publication (Framke, 2018). (p. 323)

Babe.net's strategy proved successful, as 2.5 million people read the story in the first two days; the website also used the new attention to launch its newsletter service, which would include more details on the Ansari story. These practices suggest that the publication of the Ansari story was intentionally controversial, aiming to attract readership and “clicks” on the website. As it emerges from the Twitter discussion, this issue was also picked up by users, as many felt that Grace was trying to capitalise on Ansari's fame in order to get attention, that the publication of her story constituted mere “celebrity-bashing” (Worthington 2020), and that she was joining the #MeToo movement because it was “trendy” to do so.

The publication of the Le Monde letter is equally revealing of how news media organisations adapt themselves to “hybrid media logics” (Chadwick 2017). The decision by Le Monde editors to publish the open letter can be interpreted as a strategy of appealing to its more conservative readers, following traditional

newspaper logics. At the same time, the massive attention that the letter received online may also signal the intention to capitalise on the #MeToo controversy in the same way as Babe.net did. In this sense, Le Monde may have adapted its publication strategy to fit in with the logics of digital news consumption that privilege provoking and sensationalist content. On this point, Salter (2019) warns that #MeToo exemplifies how “[m]ass outrage and grief over sexual violence can be hijacked by ‘old’ and ‘new’ media companies seeking to redirect and rework political movements to profitable ends” (Salter 2019:331). This is an especially urgent concern in the context of what has been called the “outrage economy” (Behr 2017 quoted in Phipps 2019:237) or “outrage industry” (Berry & Sobieraj 2014) of contemporary media, where inflammatory claims and tones are increasingly favoured to gain the public’s attention. As Phipps (2020) underlines,

outrage can perform important functions, and its role in recruitment to transformative movements should not be underestimated [...]. However, there are important questions to be raised about how social justice ends can successfully – and ethically – be pursued via commercialised media in which truth is increasingly secondary to revenue generation. (p. 237)

This position is comparable to the findings by Pollino (2020) on news discussions of the Brett Kavanaugh case in the U.S. (as described in chapter 4), which point to an obfuscation of sexual violence as the central problem in instances where the event is highly spectacularised in the media.

However, it must be kept in mind that this polarisation in the sample is also due to issues of self-selection, as the cases analysed were selected precisely because they stirred animated debates among Twitter users and thus offered interesting material for analysis. Other #MeToo cases that I initially explored to be included in the research

project, such as the Time magazine cover<sup>52</sup> and the Terry Crews accusations<sup>53</sup>, proved unsuitable because Twitter reactions were largely homogenous in expressing their support.

Another interesting characteristic of this public is the pervasive use of URLs linking to online news websites. The practice of news sharing between social and editorial media is a core characteristic of a “hybrid media system”<sup>54</sup> (Chadwick 2017). A conservative estimate of the share of tweets containing external URLs is 29% for the entire dataset, 43% for the Babe.net sample and 52% for the Le Monde sample. Quantitatively, this finding is not especially significant, as Bruns et al. (2016) place the average percentage of URL tweets at between 40% and 80% for “acute events”. Upon close reading during thematic analysis, however, the inclusion of external URLs often appears crucial as a large number of users rely on external articles for their discussion of controversial issues. What is especially striking is that in the dataset this practice is so widespread that a large share of the tweets would be incomprehensible without reference to the articles from news media, which led to the decision to incorporate some fragments from news and opinion articles in the illustration of the qualitative findings. The inclusion of news articles and opinion pieces often accompanies a user’s expression of their opinion on the controversy of the day. Some users simply post articles to share the news of the moment and express their opinion on the event – this

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<sup>52</sup> I hypothesised that the Time magazine cover dedicated to “the Silence Breakers” as their “Person of the Year” (Zacharek, Dockterman & Sweetland Edwards 2017) might have elicited discussion on Twitter because the founder of the Me Too movement, Tarana Burke, was not pictured on the cover. An exploratory analysis of a sample of tweets, however, showed that only a handful of users took issue with this choice. The vast majority of the sample welcomed the publication of the magazine.

<sup>53</sup> Actor Terry Crews was one of the few famous men who publicly accused another man in the industry of sexual assault. Based on the argument that “Terry Crews’s story has been accepted into #MeToo based on his victimization at the hands of another man, not his position as an actual victim of sexual assault” (Curry 2019:288), I analysed a sample of tweets mentioning Crews to explore the public’s responses to the case. Again, support for Crews was nearly universal. This is an interesting result that deserves further analysis because it appears that Crews received more unconditional support and credibility than many female survivors. However, these insights were not deemed suitable to answer the research questions.

<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the blurring of boundaries between media genres is a key feature of hybrid media systems (Chadwick 2017).

is the case with the articles that originated the two controversies analysed (the Babe.net article and the Le Monde letter). Other times, especially when posting opinion pieces, users express agreement or disagreement with the articles they share, often using quotes from the text to support their arguments. This finding is not new, as the “active audience” tradition in media studies has shown that “people use news to collectively construct everyday narratives to make sense of public events” (Chadwick, Vaccari & O’Loughlin 2018:4257).

More generally, these results confirm the highly mediatised nature of #MeToo. While a lot of attention has been paid to the centrality of media for #MeToo (Banet-Weiser 2018; Boyle 2019), most studies have focused on the way it was discussed either on social media (Boyle & Rathnayake 2019; Clark-Parsons 2019; Andreasen 2020) or in news media (De Benedictis et al. 2019; Hindes & Fileborn 2019) alone. These findings reveal that the interconnectedness of platforms requires a multi-media approach that analyses the unfolding of digital activity across different public spaces. In particular, it brings to light how, across the different media platforms where #MeToo circulates, there are “many competing voices attempting to determine, assert and limit the meanings and significance” of the hashtag (Boyle 2019:4). #MeToo has been previously defined as both an instance of digital activism and as “an object of mainstream media commentary” (Boyle 2019:4). These insights, however, reveal a more complex nature as a hybrid, multi-dimensional media object that is constructed by the interplay between different media actors and spaces. This also points to the limits of analysing conversations on a single platform, since real life communication among individuals actually occurs through multiple platforms and channels, as well as through in-person contact (Boase 2008).

## **2. Conceptualisations of public and private**

The use of social media to discuss stories of harassment and assault also influences how the public-private divide is perceived in the discussion in relation to the two analysed stories. Chapter 2 outlined how digital media contribute to the blurring of

lines between public and private and how this was exploited by feminist for speaking out against sexual violence. The analysis of the two Twitter samples gives some interesting insights into the public's reception and reckoning with the strategy of using social media to make public stories that were traditionally perceived to belong in the private realm.

One of the most fascinating findings is the gendered construction of the public-private dichotomy. This appears most evidently in reference to Ansari's masculinity, when both journalists and Twitter users refer to the Babe.net story as the "humiliation of Aziz Ansari" and as "revenge porn" (Flanagan 2018). The term revenge porn is used colloquially to refer to "nonconsensually shared images" that "are typically sexually explicit and distributed without the consent of the subject" (Sebastian 2020:1). Grace's choice to divulge her side of the story is thus equated to the dissemination of someone's personal photos, since it is seen as a transgression of Ansari's privacy, and specifically of his right to keep his sex life private. The "important gender asymmetries" (Fraser 1992:596) in the ability of defining and policing the boundaries of public and private have been discussed in chapter 1. The violation of Ansari's privacy is therefore perceived as a violation of his masculinity, since "to be subject to having one's privacy publicly probed is to risk being feminized" (Fraser 1992:601). The "humiliation" of Ansari, therefore, stems from a subversion of the gendered power to draw the line between public and private. In #MeToo cases such as this one, the feminist practice of speaking out about sexual violence and bringing issues from the private into the public sphere takes on new complexity. As was previously illustrated, speaking out was often framed about women making their voices heard and sharing their stories as a means of personal empowerment and catharsis. The focus was on women's experiences and speech, while the male counterparts existed primarily as nameless abusers, but were not exposed as individuals. By "naming and shaming" perpetrators, and by focusing mostly on famous men, #MeToo subverts the public-private divide as it "put[s] the responsibility for sexual violence back onto men by making the perpetrator and his acts visible" (Haire et al. 2019:212) as violence in public spaces.

This is reflected in many of the commentators' effort to reposition the incident as just a normal "bad date". This implies that the event belongs to the realm of private life, and it should not be discussed in a public forum. Grace is also perceived as failing to perform the role of the legitimate sexual assault survivor, given the common myth that "real" victims "are assumed to be too traumatised to appear in public" (Andreasen 2020:127). Since Grace gained notoriety by making her story public, "visibility becomes a key aspect of a discrediting discourse in which women who insist on being seen and heard are considered non-legitimate victims" (Andreasen 2020:127).

A similar unease with the blurring of the public-private divide is also expressed in the French letter, where it is stated that men's behaviour belongs in the private sphere:

Men, for their part, are called on to embrace their guilt and rack their brains for "inappropriate behavior" that they engaged in 10, 20 or 30 years earlier, and for which they must now repent. These public confessions, and the foray into the private sphere [by] self-proclaimed prosecutors, have led to a climate of totalitarian society. (Chiche et al. 2018)

There is a comparable concern here, shared by many Twitter users, that the #MeToo movement is attempting to redraw the boundaries between public and private, eroding men's power to keep questionable behaviour in the private sphere, away from public scrutiny. This is seen as an attack on men's rights to defend their privacy, comparable to the intrusion of a "totalitarian society" on individual rights. The letter also seems to suggest that women should accept the current division between public and private by rejecting the #MeToo initiative to speak out against abusers in public, keeping all behaviour that belongs in the sexual sphere firmly private. This appears, for example, when the authors state that "a woman can, in the same day, lead a professional team and enjoy being a man's sexual object" (Chiche et al. 2018), restating the dichotomy between professional-public life and sexual-private life.

This is not to say that #MeToo attempts to redraw the line between public and private by making all sexual activity public. Similarly, it should be also kept in mind that it would be inaccurate to say that "men are public and women are private; nor that the private sphere is women's sphere and the public sphere is men's; nor that the feminist

project is to collapse the boundaries between public and private” (Fraser 1992:609-610). Instead, #MeToo represents an instance of discussion in the public sphere to discursively re-construct the boundaries between public and private. In this sense, both episodes represent an intervention into the discussion aimed at establishing what belongs in the public or private realm, by making public stories that are not commonly or widely accepted as legitimately deserving of public attention. This is one of the most contentious points of #MeToo and represents one of the key themes to understand the backlash against the movement that will be explored in section 4 of this chapter.

### **3. Discursive constructions of sexual violence**

Since the key objective of the present study is to understand how evolving understandings of sexual violence shape the public-private divide, one of the central themes that emerges from the Twitter conversation is the discursive construction of sexual violence. #MeToo has been recognised as a “watershed moment in sexual violence activism, not least of all because it opened up space for (some) survivors to share experiences that have all too rarely featured in public discussion” (Fileborn and Phillips 2019:99). Recent literature has highlighted how the renewed attention to sexual violence, stemming from visibility in the media and in online discursive activism, opens up opportunities to explore and question existing notions of sexual violence (Gunnarsson 2018; Fileborn & Phillips 2019; Karlsson 2019). As Hinde & Fileborn (2019) point out,

what constitutes sexual violence shifts and evolves across social, cultural, temporal and political contexts. [...] Sexual violence is discursively constructed—what we are able to articulate and label as sexual violence is dependent upon the language we have available to name and make visible certain harms. (p. 3)

Overall, the conceptualisation of sexual violence in both sets of tweets can be understood with reference to the long-standing tension between persisting

“common-sense” notions of sexual violence as binary, and the challenges that the feminist movement in general, and #MeToo in particular, pose to this notion. “Common-sense” definitions of sexual violence are those that “limit the range of male behaviour that is deemed unacceptable to the most extreme, gross and public forms” (Kelly 1988:125). This results in a binary distinction, which Stanko (1985) defines as “typical” versus “aberrant” behaviour (cf. chapter 4):

Women’s experiences of male violence are filtered through an understanding of men’s behaviour which is characterized as either typical or aberrant [...] In abstract we easily draw lines between those aberrant (thus harmful), and those typical (thus unharmed) types of male behaviour. We even label the aberrant behaviour as potentially criminal behaviour [...] Women who feel violated or intimidated by typical male behaviour have no way of specifying how or why typical male behaviour feels like aberrant male behaviour. (Stanko 1985:10)

This distinction characterises the majority of media reporting on instances of sexual violence (Kitzinger 2004). News media have usually focused on “rare and sensationalized ‘stranger danger’ rape cases” (Hindes & Fileborn 2018:2), while #MeToo troubles this paradigm because it brings to light a wider range of experiences of violence, such as the Ansari story.

The concept of *continuum* of sexual violence is useful to complicate this binary distinction, as it “enable[s] women to make sense of their own experiences by showing how ‘typical’ and ‘aberrant’ male behaviour shade into one another” (Kelly 1988:76). The concept of continuum has a double meaning. First, it highlights the “basic common character underlying the many different forms of violence” as “the *abuse, intimidation, coercion, intrusion, threat and force men use to control women*” (Kelly 1988:76). Second, it also allows to acknowledge that “there are no clearly defined and discrete analytic categories into which men’s behaviour can be placed” (Kelly 1988:76)<sup>55</sup>. Additionally, the legacy of Kelly’s approach includes a new focus on

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<sup>55</sup> This definition builds on the more radical feminist notion that all heterosexual sex cannot be truly consensual in a patriarchal society. This was expressed most famously by Catherine MacKinnon, who contended that women “always or almost always—consent to sex with men under pervasively coercive

women's subjective experience of the events, rather than a reliance on legal or common-sense definitions of sexual violence.

Drawing on Kelly's framework, more recent literature has brought attention to the “perceived misfit between existing language and experience” (Karlsson 2019:211) of sexual violence, resulting in a struggle to “conceptualize and judge the myriad of coercive sexual acts that lie somewhere between rape and consensual sex” (Gavey 2005:169). In this respect, many of the stories that were revealed in #MeToo can be read as arising out of this necessity to construct a discursive space for experiences that are hard to articulate by the standards of dominant notions of sexual violence. Analysing these experiences, and how they are told by subjects and perceived by others, can be a “key object of analysis from the point of view of which one can analytically access the social relations—material and discursive—that generate experience” (Gunnarson 2018:8).

The tension between binary and continuum understandings of sexual violence is reflected in the two news stories analysed and in the Twitter discussions that followed.

The Babe.net story represents one of the most striking efforts in the #MeToo movement to try to open up a conversation about problematic situations that do not neatly fit into binary and dominant definitions of sexual violence. It also shows how many commentators wanted to quickly shut down the conversation as they restated the sexual violence/non-violence dichotomy and placed Grace's account firmly in the latter category. By doing so, Grace's understanding of her own experience is negated, as it is forced back into the existing constructions of sexual violence. This highlights “the *gap* between the continuum-like experience of sex and sexual violence and dominant discourses that posit sex and sexual violence as belonging to entirely different realms of experience” (Gunnarson 2018:7).

Similarly, discussion of the French letter can be seen as the eruption of the conflict between these two opposing conceptions of sexual violence. The letter itself, and the

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conditions of male domination that render their consent descriptively and morally meaningless” (Halley 2016:259). However, Kelly does posit that consensual heterosexual sex can exist.

Twitter users who support it, call for the need to establish a “straightforward hierarchy of seriousness or injury” (Boyle 2019:58). In this sense, the letter represents a conservative effort as it seeks to reaffirm “the pre-existing normative boundaries of sexual violence” (Fileborn & Phillips 2019:107). These boundaries are perceived to be under attacked by the #MeToo stories that seek to expand the range of men's behaviours that can be called into question.

The tension between these two understandings of sexual violence is also central to the widespread use of social media platforms in online feminist activism in general and #MeToo in particular. As Boyle (2019) notes, when individual experiences are all shared on the same platforms and using the same hashtag, “this allows the common character of different experiences of sexual violation—and, indeed, their ubiquity—to be revealed” (p. 54). The juxtaposition of heterogenous stories contributes to their understanding on a continuum, highlighting how different acts are connected and similarly experienced by women in a patriarchal society.

On the other hand, this aspect of the #MeToo campaign is particularly often criticised by the public. This backlash is again best summed up by Boyle (2019), who highlights how there is a widespread “claim that #MeToo flattens distinctions between very different types of violence, thus disadvantaging 'real' victims of sexual assault by trivialising their experiences whilst simultaneously creating an environment in which *all* men are tarred with the Harvey Weinstein brush” (p. 53). While this point anticipates some the anti-#MeToo discourse that will be discussed in the next section, it is also interesting because it allows to better understand why the widespread sharing of sexual violence stories has been criticised by some users. The role of social media is again central in this point, because the juxtaposition of different stories of sexual violence sometimes creates dissonance among users as hierarchies of seriousness appear removed. This is especially true in the case of Twitter, where the 280-character limit can leave little room for nuance in users' narratives, and the complexity of the continuum conception of sexual violence does not translate easily into short social media posts (Boyle 2019). This manifests in the confusion and indignation felt by some users at the inclusion of episodes deemed as “not serious

enough” for #MeToo or in the perception of #MeToo as “having gone too far”. Both these viewpoints are quite widely present in the dataset, and can partly be explained by the difficulties in grasping the continuum conception of sexual violence by users. While the popularity and significance of #MeToo are largely due to the effort of disseminating a diversity of experiences of violence as equally deserving of public attention, the criticism against it also shows the persistence of common-sense definition of sexual violence. The theme of conservative backlash against #MeToo is further discussed in the next section.

#### **4. “Gone too far”: backlash against #MeToo**

The backlash against #MeToo that emerges from the Twitter samples often takes the form of “oppositional rhetoric rooted in anti-feminism [...] invoking feminist overreach, hysteria, and irrationality” (Fileborn & Philips 2019:102). Indeed, one of the most striking results is the frequency with which the #MeToo movement is compared to a witch-hunt or more generally perceived as a moral panic<sup>56</sup>. The theme of backlash is therefore an important one, not only because of its frequency in the samples, but also because of what it reveals about the public’s understanding of #MeToo.

In the Twitter discussions, #MeToo is often deemed by the more critical users to be excessive, overreaching and exaggerating the seriousness of sexual harassment. This type of discourse appears in many of the responses to the Ansari case, among its more fervent critics but also among more moderate commentators, who nevertheless expressed fears that #MeToo was going “too far”. This discourse also constitutes the core argument of the French letter, and was shown to be shared by many supporters of the initiative.

As Phillips & Chagnon (2020) describe, “the force of moral panic and the ‘witch hunt narrative’ is due to their cultural resonance, meaning that these well-established

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<sup>56</sup> For a discussion of the nuanced differences between the concepts of witch-hunt and moral panic, see Mancini & Mears (2016).

tropes are locked in a mutually strengthening relationship with the other cultural currents that shape public discussion” (p. 2). Claims of moral panics and witch-hunts frequently apply to public discussions of sexual violence. For example, Phillips & Chagnon (2020) reconstruct how the Obama administration’s efforts in pushing colleges and universities to more zealously investigate campus sexual assaults were criticised for favouring victims and being too punitive towards the accused. More generally, “the discourse shifted to debates over statistics, false allegations, overreaching political correctness, and the erosion of due process” (Phillips & Chagnon 2020:9).

As the analysis of the #MeToo conversation has shown, many of these themes are also relevant in critical responses to the #MeToo movement. In order to understand why #MeToo was so often compared to a witch-hunt, it is necessary to take a step back and to position these claims within wider cultural frameworks. Once again, the work of Banet-Weiser (2018) is crucial for understanding how expressions of “popular misogyny” can co-exist alongside the momentum of “popular feminism”. It is important to underline how misogyny does not only exist as *backlash* to feminism, but that it constitutes “a social, political, economic, and cultural structure” (Banet-Weiser 2018:17), in the same way as the patriarchal violence that was previously discussed. In this sense, expressions of misogyny are not extraordinary and “abnormal”, but must be understood as active efforts to maintain the status quo. Because feminism has quickly gained high visibility on media platforms – as shown by the high levels of engagement with #MeToo on social as well as other media – the misogynistic backlash manifests by competing for visibility within the same media contexts and using similar tactics. For example, during the debate on the Brett Kavanaugh hearings, conservative users coined the hashtag #HimToo to counter #MeToo and express their own viewpoints (Boyle & Rathnayake 2019). In this sense, the high visibility of #MeToo in public conversations is tackled by these users by employing the same tools and arenas – such as Twitter hashtags – to combat the emergence of popular forms of feminism and defend the status quo.

In addition to this framework, public perceptions of victims and victimhood are also key to understand the findings from the two #MeToo case studies. One of the findings that emerges consistently from the two samples is a number of efforts to differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate claims of victimisation. One of the main themes to emerge, then, is how the discursive shift on sexual violence calls into question existing boundaries between “legitimate” and “illegitimate” victims.

In order to fully understand this theme, it need to be situated within the wider concern with the emergence of a concern with a “culture of victimhood” (Best 1997; cf. Campbell & Manning 2018) that began in the early 1990s, from conservative as well as progressive critics<sup>57</sup>. This debate can be said to constitute of the key elements of the wider political climate in the U.S., and as a result is part of the increasingly polarised political culture that was discussed in Chapter 4. However, as will emerge from the following discussion, this theme is not limited to the U.S. context, as it is also significantly present in the conversation the Le Monde letter.

The core concern with a “culture of victimhood” is that claims of victimisation by marginalised groups, such as women, ethnic minorities or disabled people, constitute an expression of weakness, dependency and lack of personal responsibility (Cole 2006). Marginalised groups are therefore attempting to blame systemic failures for their disadvantages rather than their own individual shortcomings. In contrast, neoliberal attitudes influence the construction of the “good victim” who refuses to engage in “victim politics” (Cole 2006:35); this parallels the post-feminist construction the sexual violence survivor who remains empowered and assertive.

These cultural understandings of victimhood are crucial to understand the Twitter discussion on #MeToo, since in both cases one of the key points in the discussion is trying to establish who has a legitimate claim to victimhood. It has been argued that the sharing of #MeToo stories on social media is comparable to second-wave feminism consciousness-raising, which “sought to link the personal story to a societal structure

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<sup>57</sup> In particular, see the concept of “wounded attachments” by Wendy Brown (1995).

which in part enabled a vision that diminished the sense of personal responsibility and focused on illuminating and changing societal structures” (Karlsson 2018:220). How this view of the structural nature of sexual violence is received in the Twitter discussion, however, is more disputed.

In the Babe.net story, Grace's claim to victimhood becomes shorthand for a wider discussion of who has a legitimate claim to victimhood in #MeToo and, consequently, what #MeToo is and who it is for. Different opinions on Grace's position reflect these different understandings of victimhood, moving between a focus on individual responsibility and one on systemic vulnerability. Discourses on victimhood are equally central to discussion of the Le Monde letter. Indeed, the entire letter can be read as a critique of the #MeToo women's claim to victimhood, warning that the movement is attempting to “enslave them to a status of eternal victim and reduce them to defenseless preys of male chauvinist demons” (Chiche et al. 2018). The authors of the letter argue that, by expanding the definition of sexual violence, #MeToo is also extending claims of victimisation to a wider range of women. This becomes a contentious point among supporters and detractors of the letter in the Twitter sample.

In line with similar findings on the Ansari case by Worthington (2020), public discussions of sexual violence often entail the use of neoliberal discourse that prizes individual responsibility and criticises victimhood; critics of #MeToo contend that the movement perpetuates a “culture of victimhood”. In this view, “women *feel* victimized because feminism has brainwashed them into renaming their unsatisfactory sexual experiences as rape. [...] The solution is easy: one can choose to be a victim or not” (Phipps 2019:7). This perspective is not new and mirrors the earlier backlash suffered by anti-rape feminism in the late 1980s and 1990s, when it was criticised for reinforcing women's victimisation. For instance, Naomi Wolf (1993) used the negative term “victim feminism” to describe “when a woman seeks power through an identity of powerlessness” (p. 147). In recent years, such views have become relevant again given how the public's attention has been increasingly drawn toward issues of social justice, as testified by the new relevance of feminism and anti-sexual

violence sensitivity. In response, a renewed backlash has also emerged, expressing concern for a new “culture of victimhood” characterised by victimisation as “a way of attracting sympathy, so rather than emphasize either their strength or inner worth, the aggrieved emphasize their oppression and social marginalization” (Bradley & Manning 2014:715).

The renewed relevance of such discourse also stems from the increasing mainstreaming of alt-right ideas, including the re-positioning of feminism and progressive politics as intolerant and oppressive (Phipps 2020). This is most explicitly reflected in the dataset by the infiltration of alt-right language, with a vocal minority of users employing derogative terms such as “feminazi” and “snowflakes” in their attacks on #MeToo. Summing up the nature of the current backlash, then, Philipps & Chagnon (2020) describe it as a “caricatured version of anti-rape discourse that is portrayed as panicked and vengeful, which is partly a function of scholarship on victimhood and partly a function of right-wing polemic growing out of a nihilistic online milieu” (p. 12).

### **5. Himpathy: men as victims**

For all the negative talk of victims and victimhood, it is particularly interesting how both the French letter and some users from both Twitter samples retort by constructing a new category of victims, identifying *men* as the “real victims” of #MeToo. The irony of this position had already been noticed by Cole (2006): “while conservative critics deem victimism to be a pervasive threat and call to restrain victims, they nevertheless become in effect practitioners of victim politics by devising and promoting new groups of victims” (p. 4).

On this point, the concept of “himpathy” was previously introduced to describe how an accused (powerful) man can elicit a particular kind of sympathy from the public that ends up “effectively making him into the victim of his own crimes” (Manne 2018:210). As Boyle (2019) argues, however, and as is especially relevant for the theme of victims and victimhood, in #MeToo it seems like it is not “the crimes which

victimise the (alleged) perpetrator, but rather the feminists who name them *as* crimes” (p. 110). As Manne (2018) herself notes, there is “no victim without a victimizer” (p. 233), and what some users seem to put forward in the Twitter discussions is that men are being victimised by the public call-out on their problematic behaviour. This reasoning stems with the concern over the challenge to the traditional public-private dichotomy presented in section 2 of this chapter. The way in which some users understood the incident concerning Aziz Ansari as the “humiliation” of a famous man has already been addressed. A similar point is also central to the Le Monde letter, where one of the core arguments in the original letter is that all men are under attack in the new “totalitarian” climate (Chiche et al. 2018). The Twitter comments on this point are especially interesting because it highlights a particular strategy on the part of the authors of the letter. Those users who agree with the letter’s claim that men are under attack do so on the basis of an abstract claim – no real-life examples or names are given. On the other hand, some users notice that when the letter explicitly names some known abusers – such as Roman Polanski – they become critical of the letter’s intentions, since they feel that the perpetrators of actual crimes are hard to defend.

More generally, critics of #MeToo choose to portray it as an abstract but dangerous entity, removing the experiences of individual survivors from the narrative but maintaining that #MeToo represents an attack on men as well as on common-sense:

It is notable how often an amorphous #MeToo is recast in the role of perpetrator, with the victims in its sights ranging from the perpetrators themselves to anyone, male or female, who expresses any kind of reservations about ‘the movement’. [...] It is not at all clear who or what #MeToo is in stories such as these, but it seems to be a stand-in for a caricature of feminist activism and theory. (Boyle 2019:60-61)

This also parallels what Phipps (2019) calls the “hand-on-knee trope” that is often used to discredit stories of sexual violence: “Tropes such as ‘knee-touching’ and ‘wolf-whistling’ are often deployed to dismiss discussion of sexual violence, positioning women as ‘over-sensitive’ and unable to distinguish between the two” (p. 14).

As Boyle (2019) notes, this position also implies a distorted view of the role of the media in reporting and amplifying #MeToo stories. The concern with men having their careers and lives ruined over public accusations that emerges from both Twitter samples seems to overstate the real consequences of these allegations. As illustrated in chapter 5, in January 2018 many users quickly drew the conclusion that the publication of the Babe.net article would result in the swift conclusion of Ansari's comedy career. However, the following year Ansari was back in the spotlight with a new comedy special on Netflix, for which he was nominated for a Grammy Award (Otterson 2019). Similarly, users in the Le Monde sample often sympathise with the letter's claim that men have suffered professional consequences for "touch[ing] a woman's knee" or "try[ing] to steal a kiss" (Chiche et al. 2018). It is unclear who the authors are referring to, as they fail to name the men who have incurred in such punishments, while they place more emphasis on the "totalitarian" nature of #MeToo<sup>58</sup>. The claims of the dire consequences for the lives and careers of the accused men, then, appear partly unfounded; this seems to confirm the idea that it is the public discussion of these stories that is most troubling to #MeToo detractors.

By presenting women as angry and hysterical, and men as the real victims of #MeToo, then, its critics are adopting a clear strategy: "the oppositional rhetoric performs a classic ideological trick, inverting reality by posing those defending hegemonic relations as marginalized dissidents and, conversely, posing anti-hegemonic movements as dominating and oppressive" (Phillips & Chagnon 2020:2). In this view, the voices of sexual violence survivors are obfuscated, and the public denouncement of abusers is perceived as the worse crime: "calling out rape culture has been characterized as a greater threat than sexual aggression itself" (Phillips & Chagnon 2020:10).

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<sup>58</sup> It is likely that the letter is alluding to Michael Fallon, a British politician and Member of Parliament who served as Secretary of State for Defence. In 2017, he was forced to resign after it emerged that he had inappropriately touched journalist Julia Hartley-Brewer's knee fifteen years earlier. After his resignation, a number of other allegations were reported that evidenced a pattern of sexually inappropriate behaviour with women in his professional life (Stewart & Mason 2017).

## 6. Discursive solutions

The previous section illustrates how critics of #MeToo depict it as an over-reaching movement intent on criminalising an excessive range of harmless behaviours. It is especially significant, then, to look at the actual solutions proposed by pro-#MeToo users in the sample as the final theme in the discussion.

First, it is important to stress that proposed solutions for the problem of sexual violence appear only in a minority of posts; this result parallels the findings from De Benedictis et al. (2019) on news articles. This can be interpreted, again, as a consequence of the emphasis on visibility that characterise #MeToo and popular feminism: visibility risks being “an end in itself rather than a route to dismantling asymmetries of power” (Banet-Weiser 2018:54). Clark-Parsons (2019) similarly stresses the limits of #MeToo’s performative feminism: “if participation in the #MeToo movement was equated with performing solidarity through symbolic actions like sharing a hashtag or dressing in all black for a red carpet event, anyone could feign support for survivors without actually taking steps to end sexual violence” (p. 12). This is also a consequence of the limits of hashtag protests. Unlike traditional social movements, hashtag activism lacks the organisational structure to devise collectively agreed-upon, unified solutions to issues that arise. In this sense, the understanding of #MeToo as an instance of connective action (Bennet & Segerberg 2012) and of an affective public that materialises around a specific issue (Papacharissi 2015) underlines how the structurelessness of the movement can hinder the formulation of more concrete, long-term actions.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to explore the proposed solutions because they contradict negative portrayals of #MeToo coming from both its conservative and feminist critics. This theme proves especially significant as the solutions proposed differ conspicuously from what detractors of #MeToo imagine them to be, as was illustrated in the previous section.

What emerges mostly from discussion of the Babe.net story, but also in a lesser extent of the Le Monde letter, is that the root cause of sexual violence is to be found in

cultural and social structures, which therefore need to be addressed discursively in order to eradicate the problem.

In the conversation on the Le Monde letter, its critics are mostly intent on repositioning the true objectives of #MeToo to rebuke what they perceive as an unfair characterisation of the movement. They therefore stress the need to listen to and amplify the experiences of all survivors, rather than attacking them for speaking out. In this sense, the solution that they put forward is offering support to all survivors and refusing to place their experiences on “a hierarchy of seriousness or injury” (Boyle 2019:58) that establishes who is deserving of support.

A similar attitude is also present in the Twitter sample on the Babe.net story. Even though this story seemingly has a clear perpetrator, most users do not call for specific punishment against offenders such as Ansari, but rather underline the need for a change in men’s behaviours and expectations. They see the case brought up by Babe.net as the symptom of a wider problem. Additionally, they also identify societal norms and systemic gender inequality as the wider context where sexual violence can take place. This is what Kelly (2016) describes with the term “conducive contexts”, defined as “spaces in which violence is most commonly encountered by women and girls: spaces in which forms of gendered power and authority and matrices of domination are in play” (n.p.). Users therefore underline the systemic nature of sexual violence, and call for a more radical transformation of attitudes to gender relations and sexual norms to eliminate violence, rather than focusing on individual cases.

In both samples, #MeToo is therefore perceived as a step in the right direction, as it represents a discursive challenge to the issue of sexual violence. At the same time, an expansion of the discussion beyond the boundaries of criminal definitions of sexual violence is also welcome. Adopting an understanding of sexual violence as a continuum, #MeToo also addresses behaviours that are not criminal but that are still experienced as forms of sexist violence. In this sense, these users reflect Kelly’s (1988) argument that “all forms of sexual violence are serious and that it is inappropriate to create a hierarchy of abuse within a feminist analysis” (p. 77). This is evident in users’

refusal to dismiss some of the #MeToo stories that emerge by considering them “not serious enough”. Instead, they emphasise the legitimacy of every experience and the right of every survivor to speak out and be heard. This is an important strategy in the context of a movement that was extremely visible in mainstream media, as Clark-Parsons (2019) also found in her study of #MeToo activists on Twitter:

Relying on visibility as a protest tactic, however, opened the movement up to a variety of different personal and political vulnerabilities, including re-traumatization, backlash, cooptation, complacency, and the exclusion of those most marginalized victims, especially survivors of color and working-class survivors. #MeToo participants developed *performance maintenance practices* to correct these erasures, maintain narrative control, and model actions audiences could take beyond tweeting. (p. 16)

The intent to “maintain narrative control” is especially evident in both samples, as both groups of users attempt to redress what they perceive to be a wrong interpretation of #MeToo. By actively using social media to publicise their proposed solutions, these users aim to reappropriate control of the movement by divulging their feminist interpretation of the events.

A fascinating implication of this theme has to do with the concern with the perceived over-criminalisation of “harmless” behaviours by critics of #MeToo was discussed in the previous section. In feminist discussions of #MeToo, a similar preoccupation can be identified, as commentators frequently and consistently criticised the fact that #MeToo “assumes the legal system is the best or only means through which to realize justice” (Sikka 2020:8). This falls within a wider concern with liberal feminist approaches characterised by an overreliance on punitive solutions for gendered and sexual violence, particularly the use of carceral measures. Indeed, some of the most high-profile accusations emerging from #MeToo have resulted in criminal proceedings and prison sentencing, leading to a concern that #MeToo might have “the undesirable effect of increasing support for prisons as ‘solutions’ to sexual violence” (Terwiel 2019:421). This recourse to “carceral feminism” (Bernstein 2010) has been criticised since “the criminal justice system as a whole typically imposes harsher punishments on people of color, the economically disadvantaged, and other members

of marginalized communities” (Mack and McCann 2019:382). The call for carceral solutions for sexual violence therefore constitutes an expression of white privilege, as it serves to protect only privileged individuals while further victimising marginalised populations. As Terwiel (2019) summarises,

So-called “tough on crime” policies have been passed in the name of protecting women, but rather than diminish gendered and sexual violence, these measures have expanded the hold of the punishment apparatus over racially and economically marginalized people of all genders. (p. 421)

It is therefore extremely interesting that in both Twitter samples the types of solutions proposed never implicate the legal or criminal justice system. It is useful to go back to Fraser’s (1990) call for a conceptual distinction between the public sphere, the state and the market (cf. chapter 1). This distinction helps to explain where the proposed solutions are located: they are not conceived as a form of law enforcement by the state, but rather take place at level of the public sphere of discursive interaction. In this sense, users are not aiming to criminalise sexist acts. This stands in contrast with the frequent argument by many critics in the sample that #MeToo aims to punish men for minor or harmless behaviour, as it appears, for example, in the “hand-on-knee trope” (Phipps 2019:2014) that appears in the Le Monde letter and subsequent discussion. Instead, the solutions proposed by these Twitter users place

the negotiation of sexual consent within a context of broader gendered norms and power relations, rather than seeking to normalize or take for granted the use of coercion and pressure, and women’s eventual relenting to sex. [Sexual] normative scripts are depicted as requiring critical reflection, discussion and the possibility of change. (Hindes & Fileborn 2019:11)

In this sense, then, solutions are not located at the level of state-enforced punishment, but rather aim to transform the relations between individuals in the public sphere by relying on education and social transformation, with a particular focus on consent-based sexual education and more equal gender roles as a key to prevent future violence.

## Conclusions

The main attempt of this research has been to understand how #MeToo constitutes a feminist discursive intervention in the mainstream public sphere.

#MeToo represents the latest iteration of a longer history of digital feminist activism, and it is essential to consider its genealogy since “without the early mobilization of these digital feminist initiatives, the conditions for the possibility of #MeToo’s emergence—either directly or indirectly—would likely have been less intelligible and ultimately impactful on a global scale” (Loney-Howes et al. 2021:2). At the same time, as the metrics presented in chapter 4 show, #MeToo has enjoyed unparalleled participation in the hashtag campaign. This is made all the more notable by the fact that, as Rottenberg (2019) notes, “the campaign has no discernible or coherent goals except to encourage women to speak out about sexual harassment and assault” (p. 40). In this sense the “structurelessness” of #MeToo perfectly fits the framework of “connective action” that sees political engagement as increasingly personalised and flexible, as people can choose to participate in “issue publics” temporarily and on the basis of individual inclinations and lifestyles, rather than because of conventional structures of political engagement (Bennett & Segerberg 2012). This transformation is also supported by the blurring of public-private lines characterises digital media as spaces “where social, cultural, political, and economic activities frequently converge give rise to political expressions aligned with individual repertoires of self-expression, lifestyle politics, and personal reinterpretations of the political” (Papacharissi 2015:24).

However, findings also importantly point to a complex entanglement of #MeToo with traditional politics, especially in the U.S. context. From its inception, #MeToo catalysed the discontent toward the sexism and racism of the Trump administration. Looking at the dynamics in the Twitter conversations, it is evident that #MeToo was often weaponised by political antagonists as part of a wider “culture war”, and that sexual violence survivors sometimes became a pawn in political rivalries.

Despite these distractions, it is undeniable that #MeToo brought about a cultural shift in public discourse on sexual violence. Rottenberg (2019) sums this up as a

transformation in mainstream common sense: namely, that sexual harassment and violence are widespread, that women (and increasingly men) are tired of keeping quiet about abuse, and that we need to listen to women (and, again increasingly to men as well) who have experienced such harassment and/or violence, and not to place the blame on the victims or survivors. (p. 47)

Because trying to measure the net impact that #MeToo has had on public discourse is likely impossible, this study rather looked at the way some of the stories related to #MeToo can be seen as functioning as “feminist counter public spheres” (cf. Fraser 1990).

In particular, the discursive shift described by Rottenberg (2019) can be better understood by placing the #MeToo events analysed in this work within the wider history of women speaking out against sexual violence. While, as it has been stated, speaking out has long been one of the central practices in feminist activism, the discussion that emerged in this research helps demonstrate how these voices were heard in a significant manner, as became the object of discussion in mainstream media contexts.

Taking into account Fraser's (1990) claim that feminist counter publics should carry out “agitational activities directed toward wider publics” (p. 68), it can be argued that #MeToo has managed to make a feminist contribution to mainstream discourse. In particular, the concept of “discursive activism” (S. Young 1997) is again useful to understand how social media discourse can generate a shift in “mainstream media common sense” (Rottenberg 2019:47). What Shaw (2012c) writes about the role of blogs can similarly be applied to hashtag activism:

we can see that the changing of political subjectivities and the acting out of discursive interventions in the media is the practice of discursive activism. What is at stake in this theorisation is an understanding of blogging activity that recognises the interventions that bloggers make in mainstream media and particular discourses, and understands these interventions as politically significant. (p. 185)

This can be true while considering, at the same time, that the dynamics that brought these issues into the public sphere were shaped by the commercial ambitions of the digital platforms that they exist on, which mostly aim to profit off women's stories and the outrage they generate (Salter 2019) within the context of an “economy of visibility” (Banet-Weiser 2015, 2018). Similarly, the publication of #MeToo stories was also often marred by controversy and the scandalous tones of both media outlets and Twitter users trying to reframe the incidents as the malicious revenge of women who had taken their right to publicly denounce abusers too far.

In order to piece together the diverse and often contradictory elements of #MeToo, it may be useful to also apply the notion of “continuum” that was previously used for sexual violence to a conceptualisation of current expressions of feminism. In this continuum of feminism, “spectacular, media-friendly expressions such as celebrity feminism and corporate feminism achieve more visibility”, and they coexist alongside “expressions that critique patriarchal structures and systems of racism and violence that remain more obscured” (Banet-Weiser 2018:4).

As is especially evident from the discussion in chapter 7, the #MeToo shift did not occur in a linear fashion, nor did it happen without a significant amount of backlash. Rather, “#MeToo provided a moment of rupture in which definitions of sexual violence are simultaneously opened up and pulled back toward more conservative understandings” (Fileborn & Phillips 2019:100). As was shown in the previous chapter, much of the public discussion on #MeToo has focused on a central axis of tension: whether the movement has gone “too far” or “not far enough”. The struggle over the boundaries, meaning and reach of #MeToo can therefore be read as part of a wider cultural struggle in contemporary gender politics. This struggle is perhaps best encapsulated, again, by Banet-Weiser’s (2018) notion of the intertwining of *popular*

*feminism* and *popular misogyny* in the current cultural landscape. Expressions of popular feminism such as #MeToo are *active* in the sense that actively undertake political actions aimed at obtaining *visibility* in the public arena. In this sense, they make use of themes that are guaranteed to gain the broadest traction within an *economy of visibility*, favouring neoliberal values such as “empowerment, confidence, capacity, and competence” (Banet-Weiser 2018:3), rather than focusing on contesting unjust social and economic structures. This appears clearly in the contrast between the most visible tweets evidenced by the quantitative analysis (chapter 4), which show a predominance of celebrities and political controversy, and the more nuanced, complex proposals to combat sexual violence that were presented in chapter 7, which constitute a small proportion of the wider Twitter conversation.

On the other hand, because popular misogyny is institutionalised and invisible in patriarchal societies, it manifests only when it is actively challenged, as evidenced by recent anti-feminist trends such as the rise of the alt-right and of populist politics. In this sense, popular misogyny is *reactive*. This framework represents a key lens to understand how, in the two cases analysed, #MeToo represents both a feminist intervention and the cause for anti-feminist backlash:

The intensification of misogyny in the contemporary moment is in part a reaction to the culture-wide circulation and embrace of feminism. Every time feminism gains broad traction—that is, every time it spills beyond what are routinely dismissed as niched feminist enclaves—the forces of the status quo position it as a peril, and skirmishes ensue between those determined to challenge the normative and those determined to maintain it. (Banet-Weiser 2018:3)

These suggestions are especially useful in light of the limitations of this study. The selection of only the first six months of the movement, the qualitative focus on two case studies alone, and the choice of Twitter as the only platform all hinder the ability to offer empirical insights into the evolution and significance of #MeToo in the longer term. For example, research on events that took place later in 2018 (Boyle & Rathnayake 2019; Pollino 2020) show an increased polarisation of political antagonism in the U.S., and point to an even more acute interpretation of #MeToo as

a “culture war”. Additionally, the focus on a single platform can only offer a partial understanding of the movement, since, as has been shown, online activities usually take the form of “networked protests” (Tufekci 2017) articulated across multiple digital and non-digital spaces. The particular affordances of each social media platform also affect the way the movement unfolds (Comunello, Mulargia & Parisi 2016), and thus the practices that take place on Twitter are inevitably different from other platforms (see Manikonda et al. 2018). Similarly, selecting only periods of peak activity risks obfuscating the everyday practices that activists undertake daily. For example, Clark-Parsons (2019) analysed the everyday “performance maintenance practices” developed by #MeToo participants to attain long-term collective visibility. In this sense, with appropriate resources, it would be beneficial to extend the study of #MeToo using a media ecological approach (Boase 2008). This would allow to explore conversations across a wider range of communicative arenas over a longer period of time.

In line with the patterns identified in this study, the use of the hashtag #MeToo has continued to be used in parallel to resonant media events. For example, the hashtag was revived in 2020 during the Harvey Weinstein trial, receiving around 274,000 mentions across social media and news sites between 1 and 23 January (Hals 2020). More importantly, the momentum of #MeToo reverberated across the globe and can be seen in the work by local activists who created their own versions of the hashtag. In December 2020, a prominent Turkish writer was accused of sexual harassment by one of his students, and women in the country began using the hashtag #UykularınızKaçsın (#MayYouLoseSleep) to share their own experiences of sexual violence and making further claims against other famous personalities (McNabb 2021). Similarly, Egypt has also seen increasing online mobilisations against sexual violence in what has been called a “digital feminist revolution” in the country (Anwar 2020). While these movements originate in their national contexts and are driven by local activists, and it would be inaccurate to characterise them as local declinations of #MeToo, a wider point can be made that #MeToo has become a global reference point for sexual violence activism. In this sense, many use the phrases “#MeToo era” or “post-#MeToo era” (Fileborn & Loney-Howes 2019) as a shorthand for the

“transformation in mainstream common sense” in relation to sexual violence and gender inequality described by Rottenberg (2019).

While no other feminist campaigns have had the same reach as #MeToo since it first began in 2017, the practices of digital activism have continued to evolve in a fast-changing world. The COVID-19 pandemic and the increased reliance on digital communications have dramatically accelerated the blurring of private-public boundaries (Fontichiaro & Stephens 2021). Because the negative impact of the pandemic disproportionately affects already marginalised populations, this has brought forward new awareness of economic and social inequalities, and new demands for more inclusiveness (Özbilgin & Erbil 2021). The consequences of these historic changes for digital activism are perhaps best observable in the unfolding of the Black Lives Matter movement, which is characterised by yet another unique interplay of online narratives and offline activity (Bonilla & Rosa 2015; Yang 2016; Szetela 2020). Writing in the *New Yorker* about the latest uprisings in the summer of 2020, and building on the work of Tufekci (2017), Hu (2020) suggests that these signify the beginning of a “second act of social media activism”. Unlike other decentralised, leaderless protests, the organisers of Black Lives Matter make increasing use of *private* digital platforms for intra-movement communication and organisation. Through this “back end” work, the movement brings to the public clearly defined aims and demands, which are combined with a savvy use of hashtags and digital media to obtain widespread visibility. This transformation in the use of digital media for activism may point to a future of more structured organisation in movements, using platforms not only for the coordination of offline events but also to define their goals and values in more private settings. In a context that is experiencing rapid and radical social changes, these organisational changes, as well as the more intersectional stance of movements like Black Lives Matter, may overcome some of the weaknesses of previous forms of activism such as #MeToo, and become more effective actors for social justice.



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