

Title: #HimToo and the networking of misogyny in the age of #MeToo

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Authors: Karen Boyle & Chamil Rathnayake

Karen Boyle, University of Strathclyde

Twitter: @ProfKarenBoyle

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-0162-2656

Chamil Rathnayake, University of Strathclyde

Twitter: @Traversingbits

ORCID ID: [0000-0003-1964-2639](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1964-2639)

Corresponding author:

Karen Boyle, Professor of Feminist Media Studies, School of Humanities, University of Strathclyde, Lord Hope Building, G4 0LT.

Karen.Boyle.101@strath.ac.uk

Author biographies:

Karen Boyle is Professor of Feminist Media Studies and Programme Director of Applied Gender Studies at the University of Strathclyde. Her research has long been concerned with questions of gender, violence and representation and her latest book - *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism* – will be published in 2019.

Chamil Rathnayake is a lecturer in the School of Humanities at the University of Strathclyde. His current research focuses on social media affordances, issue-response networks, and cross-ideology exposure, with a special emphasis on the ways in which new media affordances restructure collective activity.

Abstract:

This article brings together a quantitative approach which seeks to map and understand actor centrality and connectivity in relation to Twitter using social network analysis, with a qualitative set of interdisciplinary concerns around media representations of men's sexual violence against women. Our focus is #HimToo, a short-lived Twitter-backlash to #MeToo concentrated around the Brett Kavanaugh hearings and confirmation. We explore how #HimToo flourished and floundered across two key periods: the first related to the broadcast confirmation hearings; the second a backlash triggered by a Kavanaugh-supporting mom. With a dataset of over 277,000 Tweets, we argue that the first period shows an actor-centric conservative engagement which is dominated by female commentators, but displays a male-orientation that Kate Manne (2018) has described as himpathy. The second period presents both a serious and satirical response to the first. Whilst there is a significant reorientation of both activity and actors in this second period, we identify persistent gendered and generational patterns which warrant a more cautious response from feminist critics. We thus connect our analysis to debates about social media connectedness, gendered patterns of social media ab/use, and the role of social media in a highly polarised political climate in the USA.

Keywords: Twitter; #HimToo; #MeToo; connectivity; men's violence against women.

#HimToo and the networking of misogyny in the age of #MeToo

This article explores the meeting point of our ongoing individual research projects using different methodological and conceptual approaches to the study of contemporary (feminist) politics and media representations. We bring together a quantitative approach which seeks to map and understand actor centrality and connectivity in relation to Twitter using social network analysis, with a more qualitative set of interdisciplinary concerns around how men's sexual violence against women is understood in and through media representations. Our focus is #HimToo, a short-lived Twitter-backlash to #MeToo concentrated around the Brett Kavanaugh hearings and confirmation. We explore how #HimToo flourished and floundered, linking this to debates about connectedness on social media, gendered patterns of social media use (and abuse), and the role of social media in a highly polarised political climate in the USA.

#MeToo has a long history. The term is credited to Tarana Burke for whom 'Me Too' was a rallying cry for a movement (founded in 2006) centring multiply marginalised young women of colour and their experiences of sexual violence (Burke, n.d.). However, it was in the aftermath of sexual harassment allegations against Harvey Weinstein that #MeToo went viral when US 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 October 15, 2017)

The response to Milano's tweet did, indeed, give a sense of the magnitude of the problem, extending far beyond the experiences of privileged US women and showing no sign of abating as we write, nearly two years later. Whilst #MeToo is not confined to the US, it is doubtful it would have taken hold without the wider context provided by Trump's election despite evidence of his unashamed misogyny (Kate Manne 2018). This has contributed to a resurgence in feminist activism of which #MeToo is just one part, demonstrating how popular misogyny and popular feminism are conjoined (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2018). Not surprisingly, both #MeToo specifically (Karen Boyle 2019b) and the implications of the digital for feminism more broadly (Aristea Fotopolou 2016; Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessalyn Keller and Jessica Ringrose 2019) have also been areas of growing scholarly interest, and this is one of the wider contexts in which the current study can be situated.

Whilst #MeToo is by no means limited to US culture, #HimToo *does* speak more specifically to that culture and illustrates its extremely polarised nature. #HimToo was used in a variety of contexts prior to September 2018 (Emma Grey Ellis 2018), including as a way for men to share experiences of sexual assault victimisation alongside #MeToo (Luke O'Neil 2018). However, #HimToo started trending – and caught our attention - during the confirmation for Trump's Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. In this usage, #HimToo was no longer about the experiences of male victims of sexual assault, but a marker of men's alleged vulnerability to (false) accusation in light of Dr Christine Blasey Ford's testimony that Kavanaugh had attempted to rape her when they were both teenagers. Our data collection starts from September 25 2018, the day before Ford and Kavanaugh gave their televised testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee. This first period of data collection ran until October 5, when Kavanaugh's nomination clinched Senate support.

On October 6, the day of Kavanaugh's confirmation, a Kavanaugh-supporting mom tweeted a photo of her son in his services uniform with the text:

This is MY son. He graduated #1 in boot camp. He was awarded the USO award. He was #1 in A school. He is a gentleman who respects women. He won't go on solo dates due to the current climate of false sexual accusations by radical feminists with an axe to grind. I VOTE. #HimToo.

We are unable to trace the impact of this specific tweet for reasons discussed below. However, it was the response to this tweet – most particularly from her son – which caused #HimToo to become a mainstream media story, and this is where we pick up the analysis.

The son was not, initially, part of the #HimToo conversation: he did not have a Twitter account and his photo was posted without his consent. However, after his mom's tweet went viral he joined Twitter on 8th October – using the handle @Thatwasmymom - to challenge the way his image had been used. His first tweet stated that he never had, and never would, support #HimToo and used the hashtag #BelieveWomen. This changed the direction of #HimToo and, after another peak of activity associated with his response, the hashtag largely died out.

Our data thus offers an insight into the life of a hashtag in the broader context of a debate about men's sexual violence against women and against the polarisation of the political sphere in the US. In reading #HimToo as an example of what Banet-Weiser and Kate Miltner (2015) call "networked misogyny", we are interested both in the specific affordances which enable the networking of #HimToo and the ways this intersects with debates about feminism, gender and violence beyond the specific platform we investigate. Our interest in how this networked misogyny was defused also points to the value of considering how hashtags evolve over time. In what follows, we present an account of our data collection before offering an analysis of the two main time periods. In our conclusion, we look at the afterlife of #HimToo and briefly compare this with the resilience of #MeToo.

Data collection and analysis

We collected a sample of 277,856 tweets that included #HimToo through the Twitter search Application Programming Interface (API). The API allows researchers to run queries related to search terms (such as a hashtag) over a specific time period. The API we used (Search API) allows access to tweets within seven days of the tweet being shared: as such, this relies on datasets being constructed whilst search terms are still in active use (1). The API provides a snapshot of activity associated with the hashtag: Twitter (n.d.) describe this process as focusing on "relevance not completeness". In other words, this does not give us access to *all* tweets using the #HimToo hashtag but allows us to construct a substantial dataset.

Our first dataset includes 112,169 tweets gathered between September 25 and October 5, capturing Twitter activity related to the broadcast testimony. The second dataset is comprised of 150,000 tweets from October 9-12, capturing activity in the aftermath of @Thatwasmom's tweet. We restricted the API search to a maximum of 150,000 tweets for each period. While the samples returned by the search did not reach this maximum level for the first period, the second sample reached 150,000 tweets. To capture the decline of #HimToo, we collected a

third dataset between October 14-24. Indicating a significant decline in activity, this search returned only 15,687 tweets.

We also collected three datasets to observe engagement with #MeToo. The greater activity associated with #MeToo meant that we had to collect data over smaller time-periods, with 150,000 tweets each returned from October 3-5 and October 16-18, and 100,000 from October 21-24. Although this does not cover exactly the same period as our #HimToo data, it allows for snapshot comparisons which we return to in the conclusion.

Data returned by the API search includes screen names of senders as well as those mentioned in replies and mentions, the text (tweet), and time of the tweet: it does not, however, allow us to systematically map the number of “likes” received by each tweet. It does allow us to consider retweets and @replies/ mentions: retweets indicate tendency to spread another user’s message while @replies and mentions indicate discursive intent. Therefore, we constructed separate network visualisations to map retweet relationships and interactions using @reply/mention features. Nodes represent Twitter users (actors) who used the hashtag, and edges (ties) indicate retweet, reply, or mention relationships. We identified the top actors systematically by identifying the largest clusters (partitions) in each network and selecting actors with high prestige in each cluster. **Figure 1** provides an example visualisation: the visualisations were important stepping-stones in building our analysis, allowing us to identify key actors and the patterns of activity around them. We used indegree (incoming degree), the number of links pointed towards each node to examine actor prestige in each network (Albert-László Barabási 2016). In retweet networks, indegree indicates how many times an actor’s message has been retweeted; in @reply/mention networks, indegree shows the number of times a user is replied to or mentioned. Analysis of indegree within networks helps understand prominent actors and how clusters form around them.

Whilst this quantitative approach allows us to identify key actors and patterns in online interactions, to explore how #HimToo responds to the feminist challenge of #MeToo a more qualitative approach was needed. For this we initially read through 15,000 tweets from each of the two main #HimToo datasets, selected from the beginning, middle and end of the periods studied. In order to better understand the activity around the key nodes in the retweet and @reply/mention networks, we also searched for all mentions of these figures in our database and read through associated tweets to give us a sense of how threads developed over time. By looking at the original tweets we were able to note use of images/ gifs, observe how users presented themselves (in usernames, pictures and profiles), and how well networked and active users were on Twitter (verified accounts, number of followers and tweets). This led to a second round of quantitative analysis where we mapped word frequencies. As such, the quantitative and qualitative analyses were mutually constitutive. This is itself unusual both in network analysis of large datasets, where the emphasis is typically on larger patterns (e.g. Haewoon Kwak, Changyun Lee, Hosung Park, and Sue Moon 2010) and central actors, and communities (e.g. David Ediger, Karl Jiang, Courtney Corley, Rob Farber, and William Reynolds 2010), *and* in feminist responses to hashtag activism which have tended to be qualitative and smaller in scale (e.g. Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose and Jessalyn Keller 2019). Accordingly, this mixed methods approach situates network analytics in the context of the issue, revealing the nuanced nature of engagement.

The deletion of the #HimToo mom’s tweet and account highlights some of the ethical issues in using Twitter in feminist research. We have only used usernames or handles if these belong to verified accounts (like @RealCandaceO), to users who identify a professional role

associated with their accounts (like @amandawallwin), or those who have become public figures such that their Twitter identity is well-known (like @Thatwasmymom/ Pieter Hanson). We do not name the #HimToo mom. Although a screen grab of her tweet was widely shared in mainstream media, in interviews Hanson insisted his mother should not be identified (Meagan Flynn 2018). It is not our intent to contribute to the shaming of the mother which was part of the response to her tweet, and her identity is not essential to this paper. It is also important to note that when we discuss gender, race and political affiliation, we are relying on information users present about themselves which may or may not be accurate. However, as our intention is to explore Twitter as a discursive political space this self-presentation is itself significant.

Period 1: “No Man is Safe”

In our first dataset (September 25 – October 5), comprising 112,169 tweets, #HimToo is primarily used by conservatives, linking the accusations against Brett Kavanaugh to a wider concern about shifting gender politics which cannot be divorced from party politics. Within this retweet network, there is a relatively small number of prominent actors: only eight actors have indegrees above 1000. Of those eight, seven are women, all present as conservative and, apart from @RealCandaceO (discussed below), all are unverified accounts.

The most prominent actor in the network is @RealCandaceO (Candace Owens), an African American conservative activist and vocal supporter of Trump. She is the Communications Director of Turning Point, a contentious conservative student group, and is active across a range of social media platforms: at the time we gathered our data, she had 950,000 Twitter followers. Owens’ online identity in many ways hinges on her anomalous position within the Republican party: as is well known, support for Trump in 2016 was *lowest* among Black women and *highest* among white men (Amanda Durkee 2016). Owens references this in her Twitter profile, which, in December 2018, simply states “Black People Don’t Have to be Democrats. #Blexit”. Whilst it is beyond our scope to explore Owens’ wider significance for conservative Twitter, our data indicates that Owens almost single-handedly dominates the #HimToo retweet network in this period. Moreover, the 28731 edges directed at Owens do not represent the same tweet: the majority of those who use #HimToo echo messages, rather than *a* specific message, sent by Owens, indicating an actor-centric engagement: in other words, there is a concentration of activity around Owens rather than diffusion of activity across diverse users.

Owens’ most retweeted messages demonstrate that this is a reactive movement centring men but led by women:

I’m loving the hashtag #HimToo. It appears to be a movement built of men who have had their lives and families destroyed by false allegations and a lack of due process. Radical feminism has become problematic and needs to be addressed.
Dr. Luke, Brett Kavanaugh...
#himtoo
(@RealCandaceO, September 26)

Kavanaugh has me on the brink of tears.
The determination of this hearing is so much bigger than people realize.
This is the determination of the future of our sons, our brothers, our fathers.

The republicans in Congress must end this cultural war.
#DefendOurMen #HimToo
(@RealCandaceO, September 27)

FBI report COMPLETED.
Kavanaugh is INNOCENT.
So proud of the REAL women in this country who took a stand and defended our men
(our husbands, brothers, fathers and sons) against the evils of the left – their radical
feminism and LIAR Christine Ford.
#ConfirmKavanaugh #HimToo
(@RealCandaceO, October 4)

Both in the seriousness of tone and mode of address, these tweets are representative of the data gathered in this period. Owens is addressing a like-minded audience, as the repeated use of “our” suggests, and both our quantitative and qualitative analysis supports Owens’ assumption, pointing to the conservative-orientation of engagement with Owens’ #HimToo messages. It is also an explicitly affective address: she is *on the brink of tears*, proud of women who *defended* our men from the *war* being waged against them. Men and their families have been *destroyed*. The left and radical feminism are associated with *evils*. Kavanaugh’s INNOCENCE (something the FBI investigation did not seek to determine), is juxtaposed with the characterisation of Ford as a LIAR. In another tweet (October 3) Owens uses the hashtag #LockHerUp about Ford, echoing Trump’s 2016 rallying cry against Hillary Clinton. This labelling of Ford as a LIAR who should be physically and criminally sanctioned is a recurring theme in the dataset. Although clearly not as serious as the death and rape threats which led to Ford and her family being moved repeatedly in the months following her testimony (Lisa Ryan 2018), Owens’ affective address and call for physical restraint are part of the “conductive context” (Liz Kelly 2016) for this behaviour.

[Figure 1 about here]

Although Owens is the centre of activity, smaller clusters demonstrate that #HimToo is dominated by conservative voices in this period. Indeed party affiliation seems to be the characteristic which the largest nodes in the retweet network share, indicated by, for example, reference to Trump, the NRA (National Rifle Association), deplorables (2) and #MAGA (Make American Great Again) in profiles and pinned tweets. The second largest partition in the retweet network includes 4625 twitter users (nodes) and 5522 retweets (edges) largely expressing conservative sentiments: when combined with the @RealCandaceO cluster, this represents more than 60% of retweets in the full network. The second partition includes several central actors, both male and female and encompassing different racial groups.

So far, we have focused on retweet activity. Our analysis of @reply/mention networks demonstrates strong similarities, in particular, Owens’ dominance (indegree: 487): all other actors in this cluster have an indegree below 30. It is unsurprising that the indegree for the retweet network is considerably higher than for the @replies/mentions network: nevertheless, Owens’ dominance across both is striking. The @replies/mentions largely support Owens’ pro-Kavanaugh view, often seeking to extend it, contributing to a sense of #HimToo as a nascent movement. This includes testimony from men claiming to have been falsely accused, as well as from women supporting men who they present as victims of false accusation. Comments about Owens herself – including the few about her appearance – are appreciative. The limited opposition to her is notably not personalised.

The second partition in the @reply/mention network indicates similar dynamics. As in the retweet network, the central actors share political affiliation above all else. Whilst #HimToo-support for Kavanaugh is not always allied to explicit attacks on Ford, the vulnerability of men post-#MeToo is a central theme and “no man is safe” is a common refrain. It is particularly telling that those using #HimToo at this stage frequently evoke husbands, fathers, brothers and sons as stand-ins for conservative constructions of the family. A word-frequency analysis (**Table 1**) demonstrates both the salience of relational terms and the semantic privileging of men, particularly sons. Note, for instance, that Owens focuses on “our husbands, brothers, fathers, sons”, but does not use the female-equivalent terms. As Kate Manne (2018: 210) notes in a discussion of what she calls “himpathy”: “we sympathize with him first, effectively making him into the victim of his own crimes”. As an attempt to re-orient #MeToo to centre men, #HimToo can be convincingly analysed as an exemplar of “himpathy”. This semantic emphasis on male roles is perhaps not surprising given Kavanaugh’s repeated self-positioning as son, husband and father (Brett Kavanaugh 2018), and the striking emphasis on families underscores the extent to which the family is seen as an appropriately patriarchal institution within this conservative cluster. Nevertheless, it is striking that the identity of “wife” is invoked so *infrequently* and when it is used it is almost exclusively in relation to expressing sympathy or admiration for *Kavanaugh’s* wife. This might reflect the sense that “wife” is not an agentic, political identity for women to occupy: those supporting Kavanaugh/ discrediting Ford don’t do so *as* wives. However, this is not true for mothers: there is a tradition of women’s political organising *as* mothers which is reflected in our dataset even prior to the #HimToo mom’s tweet.

[TABLE 1 around here]

Another way Kavanaugh’s supporters assert his vulnerability is by allying him with African American males. Again, this follows Kavanaugh’s lead: his performance in the hearings was in many ways a replay of Clarence Thomas’s 1991 response to Professor Anita Hill’s allegations of sexual harassment, a link made repeatedly in mainstream media commentary as well as in our dataset. More surprisingly, Kavanaugh and the nascent #HimToo movement are also linked with other African American men: Brian Banks, a footballer wrongly convicted of rape; Herman Cain whose campaign for the 2012 Republican Presidential nomination was derailed by sexual harassment allegations; and, staggeringly, Emmett Till, the 14-year-old boy lynched in Mississippi in 1955. The Duke Lacrosse case is also repeatedly mentioned: this involved highly publicised rape allegations made by an African American woman against three white Duke Lacrosse players, a case which was equally publicly dropped before trial. Whilst links to African American men bolster Kavanaugh’s credibility as a victim, the linking of Ford with African American women seems designed to diminish hers, ironically underscoring the conditions that led to Tarana Burke’s initial usage of Me Too. These tweets link *demonstrably* false allegations and those that have never been the subject of criminal investigation, and suggest parallels between the literal lynching of African American men and boys and the potential damage to Kavanaugh’s career prospects and “good name”.

Whilst this is presented as a response to a #MeToo movement which has “gone too far”, our dataset provides very few examples of users linking the allegations against Kavanaugh to allegations of the #MeToo era: the cases mentioned above date from 1955 to 2011. In contrast, when prominent #MeToo cases *are* mentioned, it is typically to discredit

Democratic women through their association with figures like Weinstein. This reinforces our developing argument that #HimToo reads #MeToo through a party-political himpathetic lens.

This is given further weight when we consider the other two significant clusters in the @reply/mention network which centre around Democratic women: actors and activists Alyssa Milano (indegree: 234) and Emily Ratajkowski (indegree:16) and Senators Dianne Feinstein (indegree: 118) and Mazie Hirono (indegree: 28) . The #HimToo activity around these women largely echoes conservative sentiments. Like “LIAR Ford” and the “feminists” invoked by @RealCandaceO, Milano and Feinstein are repeatedly accused of victimising Kavanaugh and his family in their determination to weaponise sexual assault for party-political gain. That these – elite, Democratic – women do not “speak for” (female) Republicans is a recurring claim, and echoes Trump’s self-positioning as an outsider in relation to political and Hollywood elites.

The responses to Milano additionally pour scorn on her testimony of sexual assault. Milano’s links to Bill Clinton (who also faced sexual assault allegations) as well as Weinstein are used to discredit her activism. Underpinning many of these responses is an assumption – at times explicit, at others implicit – that “real” rape survivors would not speak out, and certainly not in a *political* way. A tension around victim/survivor speech has long been observed in feminist analyses of media representations of sexual assault (Jan Jordan 2011). For an account to be true, the victim/survivor should be too traumatised to be able to speak of it: the very act of speaking out is thus marked as suspect – and demanding to be heard in the political arena troubles the stereotype of the “perfect victim” even more thoroughly.

Yet the scale of #MeToo poses a challenge to this: surely *all* these women can’t be lying? As a public figure prior to her involvement with #MeToo, Milano is thus central to the networking of misogynist responses. If she has ever been inconsistent (and of course she has), if she has enjoyed public success (and of course she has), then stories of private trauma are rendered in-credible. Moreover, her very visibility is deemed suspicious, such that her involvement with #MeToo is constructed as a visibility-enhancing career-move for an ageing “Hollyweird” woman who is a “washed up” “has-been”. In a depressingly predictable move, Milano’s clothing (particularly a top worn to the Senate Hearings) is used to cast doubt on her credibility, and her un/attractiveness is debated. Thus Milano is juxtaposed with “real” victims, including a number of women who use their own experiences of assault as a yardstick against which to measure Milano’s performance (which is found wanting). #HimToo does not preclude women from also presenting themselves as survivors, but it establishes narrative hierarchies where – even in the face of personal experience of sexual violence – men’s entitlement to women’s attention is such that the vulnerabilities of men must take precedence. To identify as a survivor is not, necessarily, to identify *with* survivors.

As such, #HimToo reacts against the collectivity and diversity of #MeToo. Remember that Milano’s original #MeToo tweet asked women to share experiences of sexual *harassment and assault*, and #MeToo has been spectacularly successful in highlighting the ubiquity of gendered, sexualised harassment. This echoes influential moves in feminist theorisations of gender and violence to see women’s experiences of men’s sexual violence, harassment and abuse as existing on a continuum across a lifetime (Liz Kelly 1988, Karen Boyle 2019a). However, the #HimToo backlash wilfully misunderstands the scope of #MeToo to insist that feminists are suggesting that these experiences are *equivalent*, rather than *linked*. Based on this logic, experiences which are understood to be “not that bad” are read as inauthentic and

as creating a culture where men's every move puts them at risk of (false) accusation and material harm (Karen Boyle 2019b).

The Feinstein cluster reveals additional themes, but is similarly dominated by conservative commentators talking *about* Feinstein. There are calls for Feinstein to face investigation for lying, and – as with Owens' invocation of #LockHerUp - calls for her imprisonment. This is accompanied by suggestions that Feinstein is mentally unstable: one of the most frequently retweeted messages situates her with the “loony left” and others link mental (in)capacity to age (e.g. she is “senile”). The use of mental illness as an insult against liberals and feminists is a recurring one in both #HimToo datasets, with hashtags like #Libtard and #Liberalismisamentallillness appearing frequently. Feinstein is also described as “evil” and there are less frequent – but striking – descriptions of her as a witch, hag and animal. #HimToo is presented as a fundamentally *moral* movement (against the “evils” of the left), but the tone of the responses to Feinstein also chime with existing studies highlighting the abuse of women politicians on Twitter (Amnesty International 2018).

Although Feinstein is rarely sexualised (perhaps because of her age), there are a range of responses from men making outlandish claims that they were sexually assaulted by the Senator. These function to discredit Ford (anyone can make a claim of sexual assault) *and* Feinstein (for her credulity). These allegations are clearly meant to be read as ridiculous including implausible details which both trivialise the experience of sexual assault and make Feinstein the butt of the sexualised joke. Although these satirical attacks on Feinstein make up a small proportion of this cluster, the recasting of Feinstein as perpetrator is common, with Kavanaugh and his family presented as victims of her politically-motivated lies.

Milano and Feinstein are positioned as *shameful* figures, with exhortations that they should be ashamed/ feel shame. This is typical of affective publics, “networked publics that are mobilized and connected, identified, and potentially disconnected through expressions of sentiment” that are materialized uniquely and indicate connective, rather than collective, action (Zizi Papacharissi 2015: 5). However, the pro-conservative sentiments in this network contradict Papacharissi's claim that affective publics disrupt dominant narratives by allowing the emergence of underrepresented viewpoints. It is, however, consistent with conservatives' *self*-perceptions as a threatened and devalued political and social class (Arlie Hochschild 2018, Manne 2018). Whilst there is not the space to rehearse these arguments here, our analysis shares with these texts a recognition that these political arguments are essentially *emotional* ones, with female users documenting their emotions in relation to tears and fears, whilst male users are more inclined to express anger. Most significant for our analysis, however, is the centrality of women (Owens, Feinstein, Milano) to this affective activity.

There is also a small critical response to #HimToo in this period. However, one of the interesting things to emerge in our data is that the anti- #HimToo response is not necessarily a response to *specific* tweets or actors in the network, but rather a more general comment on how #HimToo distorts #MeToo and is disrespectful to survivors. The initial anti- #HimToo activity is therefore far more diffuse than conservative activity and typically incredulous or angry in tone: something which shifts notably in the second period.

Period 2: “Let's Turn this Around”

The second significant moment in the development of #HimToo was when @Thatwasmom/ Pieter Hanson joined Twitter to publicly challenge his mom's misappropriation of his image and indicate his support for survivors:

That was my Mom. Sometimes the people we love do things that hurt us without realizing it. Let's turn this around. I respect and #BelieveWomen. I never have and never will support #HimToo. I'm a proud Navy vet, Cat Dad and ally. Also, Twitter, your meme game is on point.
(@Thatwasmom, October 8)

Hanson's mom's tweet – posted without his knowledge or consent – coincided with Kavanaugh's confirmation and is consistent with the himpathetic, conservative orientation of activity observed above. We are unable to track all activity associated with this tweet, however, as she deleted it, apparently at Hanson's request (Meagan Flynn 2018). However, our dataset does include 3912 retweets or @reply/mentions using the mom's handle or username, mainly critical of the original tweet, and Hanson's first tweet acknowledges that he is joining an already existing satirical backlash ("meme game"). Interestingly, although Hanson gains a considerable profile in mainstream media, his account is not the centre of retweet activity in our dataset.

The retweet network for the second period includes 113,013 nodes (Twitter users) and 137,575 edges (retweets). Notably, there are considerably more users with an indegree of 1000 or above in this period (22) than in the first (8) with no one actor dominating as @RealCandaceO does in period one. As in the first period, the most dominant nodes include both verified and unverified accounts, and whilst three represent users who explicitly align themselves with Trump Republicanism, the majority are liberal-leaning users who identify themselves with causes – including feminism and gay/queer rights – more than party or candidate. Notably, a number of the prominent actors in this network work in the media and creative industries. This network is dominated by men (13 of 22 nodes), and although the majority are users from the USA this is less total than in the first period with users based in London and Vancouver also featuring.

The first retweet cluster for this period centres around Amanda Wallwin (indegree: 31967), Chief of Staff of New York State Assembly Member Dan Quart (Democrat) who describes herself as a "Queer", "Legit justice warrior". Wallwin's message is an explicit attempt to re-orient #HimToo away from allegedly false accusation back towards male victim/survivors:

The real #HimToo is that men are more likely to be sexually assaulted than falsely accused.
(@amandawallwin, October 8)

Whilst the tweet does not make explicit mention to feminist campaigns, Wallwin and others add to the thread providing links to research and statistics to prove her point. It is clear, then, that this tweet is doing political work. However, one of the reasons it is taken up so widely may be because the political work it does remains himpathetic. Whilst the shift from men as victims of feminism to men as victims of sexual assault is important, it is open enough that this message is taken up by some conservative Twitter users who indicate their support for *both* meanings of #HimToo.

A second prominent tweet within the retweet network – from self-identified, London-based, “liberal” journalist Paul Joseph Watson (@PrisonPlanet; indegree 12694) - is also politically polyvalent in this way. Watson links to an article from the *Mirror* website (Stephen Walter and Richard Wheatstone 2018) reporting on the suicide of a “heartbroken mum” of a 17 year-old boy who killed himself “after *withdrawn* rape allegation” (emphasis added). Notably, though the word “false” is not used in the news report, Watson uses it twice and calls for carceral punishment of those making false allegations:

17-year-old hangs himself after false allegations of rape were made against him. His mother then hangs herself too. False rape allegations should be published with jail time. #HimToo.
(@PrisonPlanet, October 9)

Watson echoes trends we identified in the first period, locating the impact of (false) sexual assault allegations within families and demanding the imprisonment of women. Although clearly doing very different political work to Wallwin, there are similarities to the extent that both extend the reach of #HimToo beyond US party politics and the Kavanaugh case.

Although Hanson himself does not appear in the retweet network (perhaps reflecting the fact that he had just joined Twitter), his presence is very much felt. The second most retweeted message in our dataset – from an unverified account (indegree, 14897) - is a screenshot comparison of his mom’s tweet alongside Hanson’s response with the text: “Sometimes Twitter is amazing. #MeToo #HimToo #IBelieveSurvivors”. This extends the political work of Hanson’s intervention by linking its critique of #HimToo to support for victim/survivors through the use of #MeToo and #IBelieveSurvivors. However, this feminist orientation cannot be found in other responses to Hanson. A number of the most retweeted messages are satirical responses to the “This is MY son” tweet. The most popular is from the satirical account @TheTweetofGod (indegree: 4461) and shows an image of Jesus Christ with the text:

This is MY son. He graduated #1 in his class at Nazareth High. He is a gentleman who loves women and respects virgins like his mother. He is afraid to go on solo dates with women because he is afraid they will lie and say they made him wash his feet.
That, plus he’s gay.
#HimToo
(@TheTweetofGod, October 8)

Like the other tweets following this structure, the aim seems to be to render Hanson’s mom’s tweet ridiculous. Whilst some of the “This is MY son” tweets *do* engage more centrally with men’s violence against women – for instance, picturing Norman Bates from *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock 1960), Michael Myers from *Halloween* (John Carpenter 1978), or *American Psycho*’s Patrick Bateman (Mary Harron 2000) – many do not, instead showing photographs of the sun, animals, babies, pop stars or mythical figures. Although these tweets are still effective in defusing the himpathetic thrust of #HimToo and pointing to the absurdity of asserting a man’s innocence and morality on the basis of familial connection, that this is not consistently linked to men’s violence against women illustrates some of its limitations from a feminist perspective. Indeed, the “This is MY son” memes link primarily to each other (through their reappropriation of #HimToo) not to the broader movement associated with #MeToo or feminist responses to Kavanaugh (such as #BelieveSurvivors).

Although there are variations of the meme using political figures (including Trump, Mike Pence and Ted Cruz), the link Hanson's mom makes to voting behaviour is *not* consistently picked up in satirical responses, reinforcing the sense that they offer momentary pleasures rather than political connections and mobilisations (Chamil Rathnayake and Daniel Suthers 2018). As Banet-Weiser (2018: 140) argues in relation to the joke format in online popular feminism: "too often the joke just stays a joke, living for a brief time in your feed before disappearing into the cloud". Here, it is the mom who is the butt of the joke and the more politicised responses of @RealCandaceO and others are largely left alone.

Not all liberal-leaning clusters in this period are driven by humorous memes, however. The retweet networks also include more straight-forward illustrations of the implications of himpathetic justice. These include a more serious play on the "This is MY son" meme which draws attention to himpathetic criminal proceedings against Stanford rapist Brock Turner. Accompanied by a picture of Turner leaving jail, the text reads:

This is someone's son. He raped a young woman in an alley behind a dumpster and recorded it on his phone. He served only 3 months in jail. #HimToo.
(October 8)

Other liberal-leaning tweets in the network challenge the #HimToo narrative with evidence of men's and women's very different safety planning, or provide statistics about the prevalence of false accusation compared to experiencing sexual assault. However, it is important to remember that whilst liberal-identified accounts dominate, conservatives are still retweeting Kavanaugh- and Trump-supporting #HimToo messages in this period and there is considerable victim blaming on display.

Although the level of engagement is higher than in the first period, this is more concentrated around retweets. The @reply/mention network for this period includes 2773 nodes and 1972 edges: users in this network are organised in small, disconnected clusters as opposed to the large clusters we discussed above. This shows that the ability of conservative actors to gather support for #HimToo on Twitter has disappeared, but the liberal backlash is diffuse.

The top cluster in the @replies and mentions network is organised around @Thatwasmymom (indegree: 102, compared to an indegree of 487 for Owens in period one). The @replies/mentions mainly appreciate his reaction to his mom's message, though there are some negative responses which try to bring #HimToo back to "innocent" men "falsely" accused. Many of the appreciative responses pick up on mainstream media stories, but there are also cat pictures (a response to Hanson's self-definition as Cat Dad) and comments on Hanson as a potential romantic partner (a response to his Mom's tweet). As we have argued above, whilst any derailing of the himpathetic, #MeToo backlash of #HimToo is to be welcomed from a feminist perspective, it is striking how quickly the explicitly *political* thrust of Hanson's #BelieveSurvivors statement is watered down, with Hanson himself becoming the story.

The second largest cluster in the @reply/mention/ network includes Democratic Senator Chuck Schumer (@SenSchumer: indegree 26) and actor and Republican James Woods (@RealJamesWoods: indegree 16): as the indegrees indicate, this is a fairly insignificant cluster compared both to @Thatwasmymom and, particularly, @RealCandaceO in period one. This cluster consists of pro-Kavanaugh, Republican-identified Twitter users and has

clear similarities with our analysis of the first period. Schumer and the Democrats are criticised for weaponizing sexual assault for party-political gain when their own sexual morality is in question. They are accused of rendering Republican-supporting men uniquely vulnerable whilst Democratic abusers are let off the hook. Kavanaugh's innocence is confidently asserted whilst Ford is characterised as a liar. Whilst the responses to #HimToo associated with liberal users are issue based (rather than explicitly party political), this small conservative cluster remains partisan.

Our data suggests then, that the re-orientation of #HimToo is neither complete nor straightforward. Its links with party politics and political commentators are loosened, and it becomes more entertainment-oriented both in relation to those actors prominent in the top retweet and @reply/mention clusters, and in the tone and form of activity (with a much-higher concentration of humorous memes). Our intent here is not to assert a false dichotomy between politics and entertainment, but rather to identify that the defusion of conservative political expression is not driven by formal political actors, but rather centres figures and modes of expression more associated with entertainment media. However, this is by no means uniform and serious responses calling out male violence against women and identifying men's experiences of sexual victimisation are also part of the dataset, as are claims about men's innocence and vulnerability. This makes for uncomfortable juxtapositions, but in terms of existing analyses of Twitter issue networks this polymorphism is more typical than the concentration observed in period one (Rathnayake and Suthers, 2018). Importantly, the satirical backlash is time-limited: #HimToo reaches a peak on October 9 with 99,404 tweets. Although the hashtag still generates 41,547 tweets the following day – making this the second most active day in our datasets – this quickly drops away. At one level, this may be because the immediate political purpose of #HimToo had been achieved with Kavanaugh's confirmation. The second period therefore offers a response to the first, with the backlash against #HimToo being targeted both at private individuals (notably, the #HimToo mom) and at conservative women more generally. In both periods, then, it is women who are positioned as the *origins* of the activity (the “false” accusations in Period 1, the naïve son-shaming in Period 2) and as those who must bear responsibility for #HimToo as a movement *and* a joke.

Both contexts demonstrate a certain contingency in “believing women”. After all, this response hinges precisely on *not* believing women – in this case, the mom whose view of her son is widely parodied. The efficacy of @Thatwasmymom's intervention in shutting down the right-wing activity associated with #HimToo is arguably itself dependent on a view of white masculinity that is not so different from that his mom held up: women are believed because a white guy in a position of relative privilege believes them. We are also concerned that this is itself dependent on re-asserting male authority over (other) women.

In this sense, Hanson's mom is something of a cautionary tale: a classic “mom fail”, she becomes a comical figure, not only for her failures as a mom but also as a Twitter user. In a statement to *Good Morning America* (October 12) she says: “I learned a valuable lesson about the internet” and concludes that she hopes she and her son can “move on with the great relationship we have always had”. The mom's foray into the public sphere of Twitter comes to a very public end and she is re-inserted into the private sphere of family, her own voice subordinated to that of her son.

We do not want to suggest here that Hanson's mom did not exert any agency: she posted a photo of her son without his consent, using it to make a political point he disagreed with, and

for that she bears responsibility. Nor are we criticising Hanson for his response. Rather, we want to suggest that the elements which make this “mother-and-son saga” into “a satisfying social media moment” (Heather Schwedel 2018) can also be found in critical accounts of the policing of women in digital spaces more generally: women are ridiculed for their naivety and lack of skill in the digital environment, in ways which are profoundly gendered, whilst the power of sons in the digital public sphere is reasserted (Amnesty International 2018, Emma Jane 2017). Similarly, the response to the #HimToo mom would suggest that she became an easy target partly because she was so easily marked as “out of place” in terms of gender, generation, social media skills and political affiliation (Whitney Phillips 2016). There are echoes here with Arlie Hochschild’s (2018) work with Tea Party members in Louisiana in which she identifies that a media construction of (southern) conservatives as backward is part of what they are re-acting against and what galvanises them. In that sense, there is a danger that, in the longer term, this kind of satirical commentary feeds the very activity it – more immediately – shuts down.

Conclusion

Whilst #HimToo was a clear attempt to derail #MeToo, it did not prevail. Engagement during the third period (October 14-24) is much lower (11,784 retweets) and the retweet network is fragmented into small clusters. Only one actor has an indegree above 1000 in this network: interestingly, this is Amanda Wallwin, whose tweet we discussed above as being sufficiently himpathetic to appeal to conservatives whilst reorienting #HimToo. In contrast, Candace Owens’ influence has dissipated (indegree 19).

Although our analysis here has focused on #HimToo, we did also collect #MeToo tweets. As noted in our introduction, there is considerably higher interaction with #MeToo across all periods, and whilst a full analysis of this data is beyond our scope here, our preliminary analysis indicates that conservative voices do *not* dominate this network and #MeToo activity is far more dispersed. For instance, in the first period, the top cluster in the #MeToo retweet network centres around a message sent by an unverified, not-explicitly-political account with an indegree of 8362 (considerably lower than either @RealCandaceO and @amandawallwin):

If a guy says he’s nervous about #MeToo, just remind him that we come down pretty hard on murderers too, and ask him why that doesn’t make him nervous. If he says, ‘Because I haven’t murdered anyone,’ then you’ve learned something new about your friend.

(October 1)

Although this demonstrates that the Kavanaugh-precipitated backlash is also a central concern in this network, this is a very different response to those we discuss in the #HimToo networks, focusing on *men’s* behaviour, in a decidedly *unhimpathetic* way. Interestingly, Twitter engagement in #MeToo for the second period does not reflect the satirical backlash against the mom’s tweet mentioned above, nor is it so US-centric. Indeed, the top two clusters in this network consist of users who use the hashtag as a means to fight sexual harassment in India. This is intriguing and suggests that whilst #MeToo has had a global reach (with important regional specificities), the backlash(es) against #MeToo may take on a more regional character. In the case of #HimToo, there is certainly an argument to be made

that conservatives mobilise around a sense that #MeToo is a threat to American national identity, with Kavanaugh as its poster boy.

For feminist scholars and activists, the findings of this research are therefore something of a mixed bag, offering a clear demonstration of Sarah Banet-Weiser's (2018) arguments about the coexistence of popular feminism and popular misogyny. Reading the initial activity around #HimToo as a feminist is disturbing. As our analysis demonstrates, the himpathetic orientation of activity in this first period is highly concentrated and displays misogynistic attitudes which are easily read as part of a conducive context (Kelly 2016) justifying (further) aggression against women whilst ridiculing and sexualising female resistance. That women also dominate within these networks is sobering, though women's role in perpetuating online misogyny is not new (Jamie Bartlett, Richard Norrie, Sofia Patel, Rebekha Rumpel and Simon Wibberley 2014). Our analysis also points to a need for further research around the ways in which race is mobilised by conservative commentators in relation to feminist backlash. The dominance of Candace Owens in our dataset may have had a distorting effect here, but it is the linking of Kavanaugh and Emmett Till under the banner of #HimToo which we found most disturbing and which will repay further scrutiny.

For us as researchers, moving on to the second dataset was – initially at least – something of a relief, not least as we often found the satirical responses to the #HimToo mom's tweet amusing. That the outcome of this shift was also to effectively derail the more concerted development of a *movement* around #HimToo is – from our perspective – encouraging. Yet our analysis of the second dataset also suggests a need for a feminist critique of how this kind of satirical response works in gendered and generational terms on a digital platform which has become notorious for enabling misogynist abuse (Amnesty International 2018). Humour can be extremely effective in mobilising online resistance to regressive political expression. Yet as scholars and activists we also need to be alert to the possibility that this operates in gendered ways that impact on women's political expression.

For scholars of social networks, our analysis has demonstrated the nuanced nature of political connectedness on Twitter. Firstly, it establishes the importance of considering how hashtags change over time. Our primary focus here has been a hashtag - #HimToo – with a relatively short shelf life: yet we have demonstrated significant shifts in its use over time, essential to understanding its functioning. In our two periods, #HimToo was able to do different kinds of political and affective work, which has implications for how we theorise connectivity and engagement on Twitter. In the context of specific events like the Kavanaugh hearings, we have shown that engagement can be both politically concentrated but – in terms of the issue itself – ad hoc. While the ad hoc emergence of the hashtag supports Axel Bruns and Jean Burgess' (2011) work on Twitter issue publics, the shift in its focus and lack of a shared interest among clusters during the second period can pose a partial challenge to their argument. The endurance of #MeToo offers a very different model which is more politically and geographically diffuse, whilst having a more concentrated and enduring engagement with the issues. The potential for #MeToo to complicate existing models within social media studies, including Rathnayake's earlier work on momentary connectedness (Rathnayake and Suthers 2018), is something that will have to wait for another paper.

As with much work both on popular feminism and on social media, our research is therefore characterised by ambivalence. More concretely, it makes the case for the value of situating social network analysis within a more qualitative approach to investigating the content

around which these networks are built. This allows us to reveal how misogyny – and feminism – are networked in and through specific issues.

Notes

- (1) We used the Standard Search API which allows free access to data for accredited researchers. Researchers who pay additional fees can access data going further back.
- (2) Deplorables is a reference to Hillary Clinton's description of Trump supporters as a "basket of deplorables" during the Presidential campaign.

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Table 1: Gendered relationality: word frequencies in the data sets

Word	Number of tweets where the word appears in period 1	Number of tweets where the word appears in period 2
Mother	1803	16254
Father	1067	690
Mom	1321	8762
Dad	1146	1342
Daughter	649	423
Son	7171	71607
Wife	448	449
Husband	2435	449
Sister	1105	1856
Brother	536	2097
Family	2061	1204
Families	15327	9

Figure 1: Top Retweet Cluster in the First Data Set (September 25 – October 5) showing indegree, centrality of, and intensity of, activity surrounding @RealCandaceO.

