Breaking the silence: Exploring women's experiences of the #MeToo movement

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Abstract

The #MeToo movement encourages breaking the social silence about sexual violence online; survivors share their experiences of sexual violence under the hashtag #MeToo across social media platforms, joining with other survivors in a network of empowerment, resistance, and empathy. This thesis focuses on women's participation in #MeToo through their video blog (vlog) postings on YouTube. I analyze 12 of the most viewed vlogs posted on YouTube under #MeToo between September 19th, 2019, and September 19th, 2020, addressing how women in this online forum represent their experiences of sexual violence, silencing, and participation in the #MeToo movement. Particularly, I investigate the affordances of participation that these women identify, as well as how they represent the #MeToo movement's goals, what drawbacks they experience in relation to breaking the silence, and how they imagine their experiential narratives may affect other survivors of sexual violence. Through their detailed testimony on YouTube, vloggers voice and resist the structures that silenced them while encouraging other survivors to recognize and resist these structures in their own experiences. Analyzing these vlogs contributes to a greater understanding of how individual women think and feel about the #MeToo movement as they interact under the hashtag on YouTube, an online domain that is currently under-represented in research on digital feminist social movements.

Keywords: silencing, sexual violence, the #MeToo movement, YouTube

Acknowledgements

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Chapter One: Introducing #MeToo

In her freshmen year of high school, a girl attends a party. She gets drunk for the first time. Her friends from middle school put her to bed in the host's bedroom. She falls asleep a virgin. She wakes up to pain. There's a body on top of her. She cleans up her blood alone in the bathroom. At school, they spit "Whore" (Rachel, 14:04) at her in the bathroom mirror. Strangers passing in the hallways ask her "Did you get raped?" (Rachel, 13:20) between giggles. She doesn't know. She goes home and asks her older sister "if someone is passed out and somebody has sex with them, is that rape" (Rachel, 15:54)?

The whispers in the hallway get louder. The administration finds out, and the police come to her school. Her friends from middle school tell her they will not stand by her side in court. "And, plus, we just started getting like invited to parties" (Rachel, 25:20). Her rapist is popular. His friends say, "How could you ruin his life? He was gonna go in the Coastguard" (Rachel, 25:50). She believes them when they say it's her fault. She drops out of high school.

Eight years later, she sits at her computer and sees #MeToo is trending on social media. Then, she reads some more. She posts her own experience on Facebook, tagging the former classmates who denied her experience and shamed and blamed her. She says, "He took that, and it wasn't his to have" (Rachel, 29:52). When they ask her to remove their names, she says, "Sorry, I had to tell my story. Whether that hurt you or not" (Rachel, 33:55). She leaves their names up. She heals.

This story depicts how one can be "brutalized by the ordeal of coming forward" (Flox, 2019, p. 32) as a survivor of sexual violence, which is unfortunately a common experience. For survivors, the stigma associated with breaking the silence about their experiences of violence has chilling effects; how an initial disclosure is received can affect the survivor's choice to disclose

in the future, as well as be a direct deterrent to seeking legal recourse. Silence can be preferable

to undergoing this brutality – even at the expense of a survivor's mental health (Ahrens, 2006).

The #MeToo movement seeks to challenge the prevalent social silence that envelops

sexual violence by encouraging survivors to join in a collective network to support public

voicings of violent experiences. This thesis focuses on how women participate in #MeToo

through video blog (vlog) postings on YouTube to understand how they experience #MeToo as a

digital feminist social movement that aims to break the silence about sexual violence, and

thereby resist this pervasive social problem. YouTube as a site for data collection and analysis is

currently under-represented in #MeToo and sexual violence research. I address the question of

how women in this online forum represent #MeToo's affordances that enable them to

communicate and make sense of their experiences of sexual violence. I investigate how these

women represent the goals of #MeToo, what drawbacks they identify with the movement in

relation to breaking the silence about sexual violence, and how they imagine other survivors may

be affected by #MeToo participants' experiential narratives about sexual violence. Addressing

these questions contributes to the existing literature on the #MeToo movement by analyzing how

individual women think and feel about #MeToo and its possibilities for voicing firsthand

experiences of sexual violence and breaking their silences online.

Sexual violence is a public health crisis, a human rights issue, and a form of systemic

violence (MeToo movement, 2021a). The minimization and normalization of men's violence

against women is systemically encouraged across a variety of social institutions and by a range

of social actors. This process is known by feminist researchers as 'silencing' (Kelly & Radford,

1990). No matter how sexual violence is theorized, feminist scholars and activists agree that a

key component to equalizing the power imbalances that structure sexual violence is mass public

resistance against all aspects of the violence. #MeToo is one such form of resistance that operates on a digital scale: as survivors participate and say "me too", they break their individual silences about experiencing sexual violence. By participating in the #MeToo movement, survivors resist being silenced by the forces that minimize and normalize women's experiences of sexual violence in their everyday lives.

The #MeToo movement began as an activist campaign in 2006 when American feminist Tarana Burke established the phrase 'me too' as a means through which young women of color who had been victimized by sexual assault and harassment could develop support networks in their local communities (Ilinskaya & Robinson, 2018). Before the words 'me too' came to identify the movement, Burke initially considered employing the phrase 'empowerment through empathy,' as a way to communicate "How empowering it is to know that you don't have to walk a journey by yourself to know that you're not the only one. And how inherently powerful it is to do things collectively. And that was the building block for 'Me Too'" (Burke as cited in Carroll, 2020, para. 15). Her notion of empowerment through empathy continues to serve as the main goal of the #MeToo movement: survivors empathize with and empower survivors in a feedback loop (Me Too movement 2021b).

Burke's phrase 'me too' became a hashtag, finally gaining viral fame over a decade later during the Harvey Weinstein sexual assault and harassment scandal, when Alyssa Milano tweeted "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet" on October 15th, 2017 (Milano, 2017; Clarke-Vivier & Stearns, 2019, p. 55). Milano's hashtag was used over 12 million times within the first 24 hours of her tweet alone (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018). Through the #MeToo hashtag, this feminist movement aims to stop sexual violence by developing public conversations about its pervasiveness, dynamics, and effects, as

well as related issues of mental health, complicity, tolerance, and consent (Me Too movement, 2021b).

      #MeToo has been used across social media platforms as a form of digital feminist activism, which has had individual and collective success in that individual women have been able to use the hashtag to break the silence about their own experiences of sexual violence, while simultaneously joining the online community of survivors #MeToo has created (Me Too movement, 2021a). At the collective level, the movement has created a network of solidarity among survivors of sexual violence who have demanded higher levels of accountability for perpetrators and worked to break the culture of silence surrounding sexual violence, particularly in North America (Me Too movement, 2021a). While the #MeToo movement website provides particular definitions for sexual assault and sexual coercion, the movement in practice encourages survivors who have experienced a wide range of sexually violent acts to join together in solidarity (Me Too movement, 2021a). The movement, therefore, is inclusive of survivors beyond those who have experienced sexual assault; its goal is to comprehensively confront the wide range of sexually violent acts prevalent today.

      Although research has examined #MeToo's racialized and gendered character and its impacts on the practices and policies of various social institutions, there remains little qualitative research on women's *experiences* of the movement and the effects it has had on their lives. Individual perspectives can be understood to robustly capture the movement as a whole. Investigating how women are engaging with and thinking about the movement through their participatory experience provides valuable insight into the benefits and drawbacks of participation, as well as their anticipated effect on other survivors.

To conduct this research, I relied on a qualitative research methodology involving the analysis of 12 of the most viewed vlog postings by women participating in #MeToo on YouTube between September 10th, 2019 and September 10th, 2020. I then transcribed the vlogs verbatim and inductively coded the transcripts for potential themes. Watching the vlogs allowed me to access detailed information from survivors pertaining to sexual violence, silencing, and #MeToo. This information allowed me to consider how participants of #MeToo think and feel about the movement as represented through their experiential narratives. I discuss my methodology in more detail in Chapter Three.

I review literature and scholarship relevant to this study in Chapter Two, including feminist literature on sexual violence, silencing, voice, and intersectionality, in addition to literature on the #MeToo movement, hashtag activism, and digital feminist activism. Here, context is given for both the #MeToo movement and feminist theory on sexual violence preceding its emergence. Drawing on the work of feminist scholars such as Kelly (1987), Buchanan and Jamieson (2016), Hill-Collins and Bilge (2016), Kelly and Radford (1990), Ahrens (2006), Corman (2012) and Parpart and Parashar (2018), I discuss feminist theory that foregrounds the concepts of sexual violence, intersectionality, silencing, and voice. I then draw on Jackson, Bailey, and Welles's (2020) and Housley et al.'s (2018) research on the evolution of hashtag activism to situate the #MeToo movement as a digital feminist social movement through its use of hashtags for participation. I turn to feminist studies of the #MeToo movement for an overview of the varied research endeavors, including the institutional effects of #MeToo on the workplace, at school, in the military, and within the media. I then discuss the limited research on women's experiences participating in #MeToo. Critiques of the movement's alleged exclusivity and poor representation of marginalized communities are also explored in this chapter.

My research design, methodology, and reflections on the data collection process are delineated in Chapter Three. There, I discuss the rationale for the research design in detail, as well as my strategic use of Esterberg (2002), Patterson (2018), and Alston and Ellis-Harvey (2014) from whom I took methodological direction in designing this project. Themes emerging from my qualitative analysis of the vlogs are also discussed in this chapter.

Chapters Four and Five comprise my analytic findings. Chapter Four considers women's experiences of sexual violence and silencing, as conveyed through their vlogs. Here, I discuss how the vloggers identify and resist the mechanisms of silence that structure their experiences of sexual violence while advocating for other survivors to identify and resist these silencing forces in their own experiences. Chapter Five further considers how women understand #MeToo as a mechanism of silence-breaking that affects other survivors of sexual violence. Vloggers' representations of the #MeToo movement's goals are also explored, alongside the drawbacks that the women identify with participating in the movement.

#MeToo has been instrumental in breaking the silences of survivors across the world. The perspectives of these women are currently under-represented in the body of research but crucial to understanding the movement, as I discuss in Chapter Two. This thesis contributes to feminist literatures on digital social movements by providing insight into how women represent and interact with #MeToo on YouTube as this area of research is underdeveloped. To meet this objective, I draw on feminist theories of sexual violence, silencing, intersectionality, and hashtag activism. I analyze #MeToo vlogs as a form of digital feminist social activism that demonstrates a reciprocal relationship between the movement and its participants, as survivors participating in #MeToo empower survivors who, in turn, empower other survivors. I hope that by analyzing and

amplifying the stories of vloggers participating in #MeToo, this thesis will encourage further

intersectional studies on survivor's experiences of digital feminist social movements.

Chapter Two: Conceptualizing the #MeToo movement

In its current form, the #MeToo movement began on October 15th, 2017, when American actress Alyssa Milano tweeted, "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet" (Milano, 2017; Clarke-Vivier & Stearns, 2019, p. 55). Her tweet was prompted by accusations of sexual assault and harassment by numerous women against Harvey Weinstein, a long-time Hollywood producer who was subsequently convicted of two felony sex crimes in early 2020 (Cobb & Horeck, 2018; Watts, 2020). Milano's tweet garnered considerable attention. In the first 24 hours after it was posted #MeToo was used 12 million times, launching the hashtag into viral fame and instigating a digital feminist social movement (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018).

Throughout its growth into a digital feminist social movement, #MeToo has remained committed to Tarana Burke's original goal of "empowerment through empathy", the focus of her 2006 'me too' community initiative (Me Too movement, 2021b; Suk et al., 2021). Namely, the movement has sustained continued focus on empowering survivors who are in turn able to empower other survivors. #MeToo's goals have evolved to include advocating for survivors and allies alike to break the silence about sexual violence and resist the structures that enable the violence. The #MeToo movement's long-term goals can therefore be considered empowerment through empathy, breaking the silence, and resistance. I discuss these goals in more detail in Chapter Five.

This literature review presents the academic scholarship on the #MeToo movement to situate my research in this literature, develop its contributions to this body of scholarship, and delineate the conceptual tools for my analysis. I begin by discussing feminist literature on sexual violence (Kelly, 1987; Buchanan & Jamieson, 2016), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill-Collins & Bilge, 2016), silencing (Kelly & Radford, 1990; Schwendinger & Schwendinger, 1974;

Ahrens, 2006), and voice (Corman, 2012; Parpart & Parashar, 2019). I situate the #MeToo movement as a digital feminist social movement that enables survivors to break their silences about sexual violence by discussing their experiences of it within the feminist Twitter community (Jackson, Bailey & Welles, 2020), which can be characterized as hashtag activism (Housley et al., 2018).

After situating the movement, I turn to academic scholarship on the #MeToo movement itself. I briefly cover research on #MeToo's institutional effects on the workplace, military, and media, and on education, hospital care, and legislation. I then outline the research on women's experiences of the #MeToo movement. Finally, I attend to the racialized and gendered critiques of the #MeToo movement developed by scholars and advocates. The chapter concludes by discussing the scholarly gap in understanding that my research aims to address; by analyzing women's firsthand representations of breaking the silence and participating in the #MeToo movement, I seek to understand and analyze their lived experiences of this digital feminist social movement.

Sexual Violence

In the 2002 *World Report on Violence and Health,* the World Health Organization (WHO) defines 'sexual violence' as including all forms of non-consensual sexual behavior, namely sexual assault, sexual harassment, sexual coercion, and verbal threats (Jewkes et al., 2002). While broad, this definition recognizes various coercive sexualized interactions that historically have not been considered socially problematic (e.g. catcalling, aggressive sexual pursuit). Its inclusivity is appropriate to statistical reporting practices; National Crime Victimization Survey and Uniform Crime Report statistics are not limited to rape, but also include incidents of attempted rape, verbal threats, and unwanted sexual contact with and without force (Morgan & Oudekerk, 2019).

Gender inequality is a major structural component of sexual violence against women (Jewkes et al., 2002). In societies organized around the values of masculine strength, aggression, and domination, like the United States and Canada, sexual violence towards women is common; it is a pervasive social problem (Jewkes et al., 2002). Feminist scholars and advocates have developed robust explanations of sexual violence and drawn significant academic and public attention to this obdurate social problem (Muehlenhard, Danoff-Burg, & Powch, 1996).

Buchanan and Jamieson (2016) discuss the evolution of feminist understandings of rape and sexual violence from the second wave of feminist thinking in the 1970s to more contemporary theorizations that focus on intersectionality. Second wave feminists were first to conceptualize sexual violence as an embodied manifestation of masculine superiority and men's right to access and control women's bodies (Buchanan & Jamieson, 2016). They were also the first to suggest that women's fear of rape promotes self-censorship, meaning that they tend to modify their actions to avoid victimization (Buchanan & Jamieson, 2016). This modification could be as simple as not going out alone at night. Fear of sexual violence directly benefits men by restricting women's activities and spatial movements, in addition to reinforcing masculine superiority and the gendered oppression of women (Buchanan & Jamieson, 2016). At the core of these explanations lies a concern with gendered power relations that privilege masculine over feminine ways of being, with a specific focus on how this gender hierarchy is sustained and reproduced over time and how it structures the landscape of sexual violence.

Concepts integral to contemporary feminist understandings of gender hierarchy include sexism, cissexism, and cisheteropatriarchy. Sexism and cissexism both describe social practices and attitudes related to sex and gender under a masculine-centered social hierarchy; sexism refers to the social devaluing of femininity in relation to masculine superiority constructed through their

binary positioning, while cissexism denotes the social privileging of cisgender over transgender subjects (Serano, 2016). Both sexism and cissexism systemically prioritize cisgender heterosexual men and their associated values and activities. Cisheteropatriarchy is the overarching structure enabling this hierarchical privilege; sexism and cissexism enact cisheteropatriarchal values and practices and the subsequent marginalization and social unintelligibility of individuals who do not conform to them (Serano, 2016). The authority of straight men affords them privilege over feminized and sexually marginalized subjects. This power relationship is often exploited by men, and feminist theorizations consider how this exploitation is enabled and sustained.

An example of one such theory of sexual violence is the work of Liz Kelly (1987). Kelly (1987) conceptualizes sexual violence as occurring on a continuum from catcalling and harassment to rape and assault, which demonstrates a broad pattern of sexual violence that affects the lives of *all* feminized subjects. The gendered power imbalance has normalized this spectrum of sexual violence against women, particularly acts and behaviors that are often minimized, such as unsolicited sexual comments and aggressive sexual pursuit. Kelly's research shows that most women can locate their experiences on this continuum of normalized sexual violence, whether they identify as a survivor of sexual violence or not. Indeed, she argues that, when sexual violence is considered along a continuum, there is no clear distinction between 'victims' and 'non-victims'; it is merely "a difference in degree and not in kind" (p. 59).

Feminist theory has advanced to address the impact of gendered power and privilege on individual lives. Sexual violence against women functions as a mechanism through which gender oppression and inequality is not only created but maintained, rendering rape an act of power (Armstrong, Gleckman-Krut, & Johnson, 2018). Armstrong et al. (2018) link the deployment of

rape as a means of subjugating women's bodies during wars and colonial conquest to gendered

power and men's more generalized violent domination of women.

While gender inequality is a key structuring element of sexual violence, intersectional

feminist perspectives suggest that other power relations are equally important, as multifaceted and

mutually constitutive systems of oppression shape an individual's experiences (Buchanan &

Jamieson, 2016). According to Hill Collins and Bilge (2016, p. 1),

> Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in
>
> people and in human experiences. The event and conditions of social and political life and
>
> the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by
>
> many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality,
>
> people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as
>
> being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender, or class, but by
>
> many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool
>
> gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves.

Because many forms of discrimination and oppression structure social relations, feminist

intersectional theory attempts to explain how they operate in relation to each other to create

complex webs of oppression and privilege that shape identity and experience, including the

experience of sexual violence (Crenshaw, 1989, as cited in Leung & Williams, 2019).

Individual women will experience sexual violence differently depending on how they are

situated within the complex web of power dynamics. Analyses of sexual violence need to attend

to these complex webs, as sexual violence is not only structured by gender relations, but also

simultaneously by racialization, age, class, sexuality, and ability. Intersectionality allows for

consideration of the diverse and mutually influencing ways that women experience sexual violence

and silencing as they use #MeToo to break their silences and resist sexual violence. No two survivors share the same experience, and many different factors impact the individual choice to say 'me too'.

Silencing

This research draws attention to women's complex and multidimensional experiences of sexual violence, which have been minimized and normalized throughout history. Kelly and Radford (1990) argue that minimizing, and thereby normalizing, men's sexual violence against women is systemically encouraged in a wide range of social institutions and by a broad array of social actors. Feminist researchers refer to the process of minimization as 'silencing' (Kelly & Radford, 1990). The process of silencing is complex, borne through the invalidation and denial of women's experiential knowledge, as Kelly and Radford (1990) describe:

> Men, who as the perpetrators of sexual violence have a vested interest in women's silence have, in a range of ways and in a range of contexts, constructed 'knowledge' about sexual violence, crime and women's sexuality: through institutions such as the law, medicine, psychiatry as much as the 'common sense' that is promoted by the media, including pornography. In each of these sites the mythology of rape is recreated, albeit in slightly different form and using different language. What malestream knowledge has attempted to do is limit what counts as abuse – it operates by the strategy of inclusion and exclusion, including what men define as violating/abusive and excluding much of what women experience as violating/abusive. (p. 40)

The mythology of rape refers to the specific and limited circumstances where rape is understood as possible in a patriarchal society. This mythology manifests in rape myths, phenomena initially named by Schwendinger and Schwendinger in 1974.

Rape myths perpetuate false narratives about sexual violence, victimization, and assailants. For example, the rape myth of the 'ideal survivor' perpetuates ideas about who is and is not credible as a survivor of sexual violence, which is largely dependent on cisheteropatriarchal values. As dictated by these values, the 'ideal survivor' is a chaste, white, heterosexual woman (Ison, 2019). For survivors who do not meet this standard (e.g. people of colour, members of the LGBTQIA2S+ community, disabled people, sex workers) seeking support is extremely difficult. Even for survivors who do meet this standard, other rape myths serve to invalidate their experiences by enforcing survivor culpability ("You shouldn't have worn that"), emphasizing perpetrator innocence ("But he's such a nice guy"), and normalizing the violence ("You didn't stop him").

Schwendinger and Schwendinger (1974) discuss the historical influence of rape myths and the impact that these fallacies have had on survivors seeking support. Assumptions such as "She must have been asking for it" lead survivors to frequently question "Why didn't I know better?" (Schwendinger & Schwendinger, 1974). Despite this research taking place nearly 50 years ago, there remains widespread belief in rape myths that continue to have detrimental effects on survivors. As Schwendinger and Schwendinger argue, "Belief in the myth that under ordinary circumstances rape is impossible has many consequences. Among these is that women can be 'twice victimized', first by the rapist and then by other persons who humiliate and mistreat the victim, because they feel that she willingly consented to the rape" (1974, p. 20). Anticipated negative reactions from other persons can act as a significant deterrent to breaking the silence and

seeking support. Fear of negative reactions can be considered a mechanism of silence because survivors internalize the fallacies they hear from those around them. Beyond rape myths, feminist theorists have identified denial, stigma, shaming, and blaming as mechanisms of silence that minimize and normalize women's experiences of sexual violence (Ahrens, 2006).

In an interview study of women rape survivors in Chicago, Ahrens (2006) identifies the mechanisms that silence them even after they disclose their assault. She finds that more than half of the survivors disclosed their experience to one other person and that the reactions they receive significantly impacted whether they continue to do so. Negative reactions to rape disclosure from both formal and informal support providers – ranging from professionals to friends and family – reinforce the normative nature of survivors' silence. Therefore,

> Speaking out about the assault may…have detrimental consequences for rape survivors as they are subjected to further trauma at the hands of the very people they turn to for help. Negative reactions can thereby serve a silencing function. Women who initially break the silence and speak out about the assault may quickly reconsider this decision and opt to stop speaking. Negative reactions such as being blamed, being denied help, or being told to stop talking may effectively quash rape survivors' voices, rendering them silent and powerless. (Ahrens, 2006, p. 264)

Guilt and self-blame also effectively silence survivors (Ahrens, 2006). Ahrens concludes that when rape survivors are silenced through any of these means, social change is obstructed; the causes and consequences of sexual violence cannot be uncovered when the act itself is concealed.

In a second interview study, Ahrens et al. (2010) found more symptoms of depression and PTSD among survivors who practiced nondisclosure and received negative social reactions than those who did not. Positive social reactions, whether perceived or legitimate, were associated with

better effects on survivor mental health. Therefore, Ahrens et al. (2010) suggest that the detrimental outcomes of nondisclosure and negative social reactions on survivor's mental health complicates their decision to break the silence because positive social reactions cannot be guaranteed.

Cyra Perry Dougherty, in her book *The Anatomy of Silence* (2019), explores the ways in which social relations in the United States reproduce and reinforce the mechanisms of silence related to sexual violence, and perpetuate a culture of violence through them. Her collection of essays, penned by survivors of sexual violence about their tendency to be silent about their experiences, demonstrates "how our collective silences operate within a larger culture of shame – a culture of shushing and blaming and objectifying and judging and protecting the status quo. It turns out that silence, and the shame it thrives in, are largely created by the choices we make everyday about how we engage with and respond to others" (Dougherty, 2019, p. 9). Dougherty emphasizes that all members of society – survivors, perpetrators, and bystanders alike – are complicit in creating the collective social silence about sexual violence. Silence allows perpetrators to escape condemnation, which enables a structural cycle of violent behavior that is justified through the denial, blaming, and shaming of survivors (Dougherty, 2019). Dougherty concludes that difficult conversations about sexual violence are critical to dismantling the shame and stigma that perpetuate survivors' silence.

Voice

To end the discussion of silence here would lead to an overly simplistic rendering of the voice and agency of sexual violence survivors. Critical pedagogy and feminist theory scholars have contributed to the conceptual development of voice, which has come to serve as a significant

metaphor for social justice movements in talking about liberation struggles (Corman, 2012). Corman argues that through this metaphor, the presence of voice ostensibly indicates subjectivity while silence, often dichotomized as the absence of voice, indicates objectification. Namely, under liberal humanist tradition, the meaning of the 'subject' is represented through this dominant discourse of voice: "who is considered a victim of violence – and how one is constructed as such – is a pressing concern. Who can speak from direct experiences as a victim, and consequently, who can legitimately speak to similar kinds of victim experiences, perpetually turns around the question of voice" (Corman, 2012, p. 21). The fragmentation and objectification of women's bodies normalizes their victimization and sustains the larger structures of sexual violence in society. As a social justice movement, #MeToo also employs this metaphor through its focus on breaking the silence and resisting the structures of sexual violence in society. This focus has failed to represent those who cannot come to voice (Gómez & Gobin, 2019; van Rijswijk, 2020).

In *Rethinking Silence and Agency*, Parpart and Parashar (2019) suggest that voice is not democratically available to all; as the voices of the privileged supersede those of the marginalized. They dismantle the voice/silence binary, in which voice equates to agency and liberation and silence to passivity and subordination (2018). They challenge the dominant notion that silence cannot be empowering – even for the most disadvantaged (Parpart & Parashar, 2019). Instead, Parpart and Parashar (2019) suggest that silence can be a choice and there is meaning attached to that choice. Silence can be a refuge, a site for contemplation, a survival strategy, and a space for reflection and healing (Parpart & Parashar, 2019).

Participation in #MeToo should therefore not be exclusive to those who are able to raise their voices in the public sphere. This sentiment is further echoed by Tarana Burke, who states that, "The waitress in the diner may never stand up and say #MeToo – and that's fine. But I want

her to know that the global 'me too' community we have created has space for her too" (Burke, 2017, para 12). Burke's original 'me too' community initiative was founded on this premise; young Black women and girls coming together to empower and support one another through experiences of sexual violence. The public attention that the movement has since garnered redefined the goals of #MeToo to include breaking the silence and mass public resistance against the violence – opportunities Burke welcomes for those able to safely participate.

Survivors who remain silent in the public sphere are not excluded from participating in the movement and are represented in statistics on the #MeToo movement's website. Further, the website encourages survivors to access resources like the Pennsylvanian Coalition Against Rape's (PCAR) resource *Speaking Out from within: Speaking Publicly about Sexual Assault* where it is explained that disclosure can be as solitary an act as writing the experience in a journal (2020, p. 3). The online spaces created by the digital social movement enable participants to engage in novel forms of feminist activism as they use the hashtag to find one another online, engage in networks of support, and break their silences, resisting the structures of sexual violence in the process. Understanding how survivors interact under the #MeToo hashtag online and use it to engage in activism in a variety of ways is necessary to develop a full understanding of the movement and its social meaning.

Hashtag Activism

The #MeToo movement is best understood as a type of digitally grounded social movement described in the literature as 'hashtag activism', which refers to a social movement predominantly organized and operated through social media websites under a hashtag that links posts to the social movement and its topic of concern (Jackson, Bailey, & Welles, 2020). Hashtag activism pertains

specifically to Twitter. Jackson et al. (2020) trace the evolution of hashtag activism from 2009 when #IranElection trended on Twitter. This social movement employed Twitter as a tool for organizing and mobilizing political protest against the presidential election in Iran. Jackson et al. (2020) identify Twitter as an important social media site for contemporary activism such as this, because it is a public platform autonomous from elite media spaces like television, radio stations, and newspapers that have historically excluded the perspectives of socially marginalized groups. Twitter is also appealing to social movement organizers because it is easily accessible and has a wide spatial reach (Jackson et al., 2020).

The reach of contemporary social media websites is instrumental to forming a broader community of likeminded individuals who share political opinions and can collectively advocate for social change (Jackson et al., 2020). Feminists have effectively created a community on Twitter where misogyny is challenged online in a way that is reminiscent of the feminist press of the past (Jackson et al., 2020). As Jackson et al. (2020) write: "For survivors of violence, the internet has enabled networks of solidarity beyond geographic boundaries, fostered consciousness raising, and provided a forum for storytelling with less physical risk" (p. 3). Feminist Twitter connects survivors through the hashtag, where they form networks that support the catharsis of sharing trauma through story while simultaneously drawing attention to "the political and cultural demands of a still violently patriarchal society" (Jackson et al., 2020, p. 3). The #MeToo movement is part of the feminist Twitter community, making it a form of feminist activism, as well as hashtag activism.

Housley et al. (2018) analyze how hashtag activism is interactionally performed in online spaces as users from around the world share their views and 'like' and reply to the posts and comments of others. Although they do not focus specifically on #MeToo, Housley et al. (2018)

suggest that social media activism in general provides a virtual space for real-time postings, the organized pursuit of social change, and the rapid documentation of critical incidents that can reach a wide audience quickly. These advantages render contemporary social movements more efficient, as they ease many of the organizational problems experienced by activists in the past, such as being able to deliver news while it is still topical and to generate interest and support quickly (Housley et al., 2018).

Understanding #MeToo as hashtag activism demonstrates how survivors interactionally use the space online, which is key to my analysis of the vlogs. The hashtag remains populated across social media websites, demonstrating the specific attention survivors are paying to #MeToo when discussing sexual violence online. Feminist scholars have noticed this attention, and there is a growing body of academic literature devoted to understanding the movement.

Feminist Studies of *#MeToo*

Feminist research on the #MeToo movement has been slow to develop, possibly because the studies primarily focus on the impact of the movement since 2017 when Milano's tweet gained public attention (Clarke-Vivier & Stearns, 2019; Quan-Haase et al., 2021). The history of the movement from 2006 to 2017 is mentioned in these studies only as a historical primer for where the movement is now. This body of research can be categorized into three broad analytic concerns: the effects of #MeToo on the practices and policies of various social institutions (i.e., workplace, education, military, medical institutions, and media), women's experiences of #MeToo, and critiques of the racialized and gendered character of the social movement.

#MeToo's Institutional Effects

Several research studies have been conducted on workplace sexual harassment in the era of

#MeToo. Alexander (2019) analyzes the changes #MeToo has inspired in American corporate culture. Focusing on employee relations law, she outlines for an American corporate audience how companies are revising their sexual harassment policies or incorporating new ones into their human resource practices. Before the #MeToo movement, many American corporations did not have practices or policies in place that adequately addressed employee claims of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination in the workplace (Alexander, 2019). Consequently, such allegations were often dismissed, left unresolved, or handled quietly under the table by the company's administration. Framing #MeToo as a negative pressure for American corporations, Alexander recommends that companies enhance their insurance coverage to protect them against high-cost sexual assault and harassment litigation, while also providing claimants appropriate channels through which to report incidents (2019).

To understand women's experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace, Keplinger et al. (2019) surveyed over 500 women in September 2016, before the second iteration of #MeToo was underway. They repeated the survey in September 2018, nearly a year after the hashtag went viral, to study how women's experiences in American workplaces were directly affected by the social movement. In the wake of #MeToo, reports of egregious forms of sexual harassment decreased. However, this came with a higher incidence of gender harassment reports, which the authors attribute to women's heightened awareness and scrutiny of their workplace interactions in the #MeToo era. These findings suggest that women were more likely to be cognizant of and report 'minor' instances of gender harassment in the workplace before assailants had opportunity to escalate the interactions to sexual violence (Keplinger et al., 2019). Participants in the 2018 survey state that since bearing witness to #MeToo, they feel more empowered and less ashamed to break

the silence about harassment at work, leading them to file more complaints for 'minor' interactions to prevent situations from escalating in severity (Keplinger et al., 2019).

Eckert and Steiner (2018) review sexual harassment as experienced by American and Canadian women university students who are working in unpaid journalism, media, and communication internships in the context of #MeToo. In a forum report, they discuss post-#MeToo media and news coverage of young women experiencing high levels of harassment during their internships. For example, of the 35 women who reported the inappropriate sexual conduct of PBS and CBS host Charlie Rose, all were under his employ at the time they were harassed (Eckert & Steiner, 2018). One particular intern credits #MeToo for empowering her to break her 10 years of silence to state that, "[Rose] was a sexual predator, and I was his victim" (Carmon & Brittain, 2017, as cited in Eckert & Steiner, 2018, p. 485). Eckert and Steiner attribute sexual harassment experienced by interns to workplace factors that prevent them from seeking recourse, such as unclear channels of reporting, fear of negative backlash from workmates and management, and little work experience (2018). Consequently, the authors deflect accountability from perpetrators, suggesting that students should be better informed about sexual harassment policy in their placement organizations, and that supervising university faculty and employment mentors in the workplace should be officially responsible for preventing and addressing these harms.

#MeToo's impact on educational institutions has been researched. Hartel (2018) investigates how sexuality is negotiated in such institutions through constructions of consent and morality, concentrating on a campaign by a British mother to ban the fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty* from elementary school libraries due to its depiction of non-consensual kissing. This campaign, which launched the month following Milano's tweet, was explicitly framed in the context of the #MeToo movement by conceptualizing Sleeping Beauty as a victim of sexual violence. Hartel

(2018) argues that the campaign, and the #MeToo movement by extension, unjustly censors children's stories. #MeToo's effects on media culture and educational campaigns are only a tangential consideration for Hartel, who is primarily concerned with how sexuality is taught to children (2018). She considers the ban campaign to be a prime example of failed sexuality instruction in British educational institutions (Hartel, 2018).

Palmer, Fissel, Hoxmeier, and Williams (2021) assess the extent of sexual violence on an American university campus. Through cross-sectional surveys conducted in March 2017 and March 2019, they examine students' self-reported experiences of sexual violence and their subsequent perceptions of #MeToo. Comparatively, they report increased disclosures among Black students and decreased disclosures among multiracial students, relative to white students (Palmer et al., 2021). They suggest that marginalized students still do not have their experiences adequately represented in mainstream discussions of sexual violence, which can complicate their ability to identify as a survivor.

#MeToo's effect on hospital institutions has also been investigated. Sobiesiak et al. (2020) investigate how #MeToo has influenced the number of cases of intimate partner violence (IPV) encountered in the context of hospital-based care. They collected quantitative data from the Sexual Assault and Partner Abuse Care Program (SAPACP) in the emergency department at The Ottawa Hospital pre- and post-#MeToo. They found that the frequency and proportion of IPV cases presenting for emergency care increased post-#MeToo, with 258 cases presenting pre-#MeToo and 306 cases post-#MeToo. The pre-#MeToo population consisted of patients seen between November 1st, 2016, and September 30th, 2017. Post-#MeToo included patients seen between November 1st, 2017 and September 30th, 2018. Despite similar clinical presentation pre- and post-#MeToo, there was a noticeable increase in cases in which men, youth, and transgender folks

sought access to care. These statistics demonstrate the positive reach of #MeToo in the individual lives of socially marginalized survivors; although the movement has been critiqued for systemic exclusions (see discussion below), there is growing evidence that #MeToo can incorporate and address the experiences of sexual violence among a wide range of survivors.

Research also analyzes the experiences of women in the context of specific institutions in which sexual violence is prolific. A study by Alvinius and Holmberg, for example, investigates #MeToo's impact on Sweden's military institutions, which have recently been criticized for high rates of sexual violence inflicted on women members (2019). On November 29th, 2017, about a month and a half after the #MeToo movement's viral rise in North America, 1768 women employed by the Swedish military published an article in a major newspaper that called for an end to sexual violence and harassment in the institution (Alvinius & Holmberg, 2019). Alvinius and Holmberg link their campaign against hypermasculinity in the military and its relation to sexual violence to the #MeToo movement, arguing that their resistance is made visible and comprehensible through the primer of #MeToo (2019). Despite foregrounding military women's heightened awareness of sexual harassment and assault as a consequence of the #MeToo movement, much of the study's analytic focus is women's resistance to the military more broadly, as opposed to #MeToo's direct effects on their critiques.

The #MeToo movement's relationship to the media and popular news has also been explored by feminist researchers. For instance, Bloomfield (2019) analyzes news coverage of #MeToo between October 15th, 2017 and the end of 2018. She concentrates on media representations of sexual violence cases in articles published in *The New York Times, Hollywood Reporter*, *The Mary Sue*, *Bustle*, *TIME*, *The Washington Post*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Guardian* to analyze the overarching rhetorical strategies employed to describe sexual violence post-

#MeToo. The two dominant and contrasting strategies were scapegoating and transcendence. Scapegoating rhetoric places blame on an individual perpetrator of sexual violence, while a rhetoric of transcendence blames societal and structural factors. Bloomfield (2019) argues that sexual violence needs to be discussed using both rhetorical strategies simultaneously, because individual and structural factors shape sexual violence and both need to be held 'accountable'.

Research also investigates #MeToo's effects on television shows and plotlines. Byrne and Taddeo (2019) trace rape plotlines in three popular television shows – *Poldark*, *Outlander*, and *Banished* – and explore audience responses to them pre- and post-#MeToo. Of the three shows, *Outlander* altered its portrayals of rape most significantly post-#MeToo; while earlier seasons included graphic scenes of sexual violence, seasons airing post-#MeToo contained rape warning messages at the beginning of each episode and no longer depicted physical acts of violence onscreen (Byrne & Taddeo, 2019). However, many shows continue to represent sexual violence inaccurately, constructing rape as stranger-perpetrated, isolated, and transient incidents, when evidence proves otherwise (e.g., Jewkes et al., 2002). Byrne and Taddeo (2019) argue that TV show writers may be demonstrating increased awareness of the systemic social circumstances that condone rape, but do not dramatically shift problematic rape narratives that advance storylines. In terms of audience reaction to these shows on fan boards and fora, rape plotlines seem to encourage conversations among viewers about sexual violence, even while viewers simultaneously romanticize or eroticize rape itself (Byrne & Taddeo, 2019). The post-#MeToo fan response to rape plotlines has advanced crucial discussions about sexual violence in the online sphere (Byrne & Taddeo, 2019). The authors are optimistic that future rape plotlines, should they follow the example set by *Outlander*, will continue to have a beneficial effect on individual understandings of sexual violence, even if they do little to change the gendered relations that structure rape.

The problematic representations and understandings of sexual assault perpetuated through television can also be found in American legislation, as current statutes relating to sexual violence do not comprehensively address its systemic root causes and dynamics (Blake, 2019; Tenzer, 2019). Therefore, the #MeToo movement is often understood in legal scholarship as having the potential to affect future legislative agendas, particularly concerning sexual assault and harassment litigation. An overarching goal of #MeToo is to challenge gender biases in U.S. statutes (Blake, 2019; Tenzer, 2019).

Tenzer (2019) likens this challenge to those encountered when statutory rape laws were amended in the past, suggesting that the best of feminist intentions resulted in a social regression. She claims that this regression occurred because of the law's gender neutral language describing victim and perpetrator, leading to conflict when judges interpreted the law with gender bias. For example, Tenzer describes the following scenario: "Bill, an eighth-grade boy, and Carol, a seventh-grade girl, engaged in consensual sex. They had been dating for eighteen months. When Carol's parents learned of the encounter, they called the sheriff's department. Officers arrested Bill and charged him with a sexual-conduct misdemeanor. Carol faced no charges" (2019, p. 119). Despite both minors being equally guilty of the crime of statutory rape, only Bill was charged. The neutrality of the law resulted in every judge interpreting the law differently – and their individual gender bias towards the 'ideal survivor' often reinforced the male-female victimization paradigm. Tenzer explains:

> The unfortunate consequences of gender-neutral statutory rape laws as applied to perpetrators and victims stands as a cautionary tale to #MeToo, its sister group #TimesUp, and future movements. There is a risk that current and future efforts will not empower women but will instead brand them as victims. When the male-female dynamic creates a

victimization paradigm, it is unfortunate. When state legislation facilitates such

victimization, it fails society and our girls. (2019, p. 151)

She recommends that the #MeToo movement shift its goals and work towards eliminating

narratives of women's sexual victimization, so as to avoid unintentionally embedding gender

inequality in future legislation (2019).

Sexual assault allegations against Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh in the context

of #MeToo have also garnered academic attention. During his nomination for and confirmation

onto the U.S. Supreme Court in 2018, three women accused him of sexual assault, sexual

misconduct, and sexually inappropriate behavior (Blake, 2019). These accusations led the Senate

Judiciary Committee to hold a hearing to determine their credibility, as the accusations were

considered circumstantial evidence; there was no proof of harassment beyond the accusers' claims

(Blake, 2019). Blake (2019) notes legal precedents that show similar accusations rarely result in

convictions of guilt. Kavanaugh's case exemplifies the difficulty of litigating allegations of sexual

assault and harassment; despite numerous accusations, his hearing determined that the testimonial

evidence did not prove misconduct and he remains on the judicial bench. Although they draw

attention to this aspect of the current post-#MeToo legal climate in the United States, Blake (2019)

does not analyze #MeToo's effects on American sexual violence legislation or legal dynamics in

any detail.

Feminist legal scholar Catharine Mackinnon (2019) discusses the #MeToo movement from

a legal perspective in an interview with the journal *Signs*. She speaks to the current state of sexual

assault and sexual harassment legislation in the United States and the potential implications of

#MeToo for strengthening that legislation. This interview provides valuable insights about the

future legislative effects of the #MeToo movement, and some superficial descriptions of women's

experiences of sexual violence litigation processes, but it does not significantly enrich our understanding of women's experiences of the movement.

Women's Experiences of #MeToo

While some research details the institutional effects of the #MeToo movement, little has analyzed the subjective experiences of women who have participated in the movement and the effects this participation has had on their everyday lives. Research of this nature consists of analyses of #MeToo tweets, studies exploring the broad experiences of women engaging in hashtag activism, and women's narratives about their experiences of sexual violence framed through #MeToo.

Quan-Haase et al. (2021) perform a literature review, identifying 988 academic articles published between 2006 and 2019 that mention #MeToo. They find 22 studies examining online participation in the movement, mainly focused on social media websites like Facebook and Twitter. All were published after 2018. Of these 22 studies, two used mixed methods extending partial analysis to women's experiences and only one employed qualitative methods. The authors describe the limited qualitative research analyzing survivor participation in the movement itself, indicating the importance of further research to engage directly with posts and conversations taking place under the hashtag on social media.

Following their review, I have identified two studies published in 2021 that focus on analyzing #MeToo vlogs posted on YouTube. In a quantitative study of #MeToo vlogs, Nelon et al. (2021) examine how sexual violence narratives are being shared on YouTube with the aim of understanding the relation of these narratives to self-blaming mindsets. They perform an observational analysis of 62 vlogs, finding through descriptive statistics that self-blaming beliefs remain prevalent even for survivors who have the space to share their stories online.

Notably, Almanssori and Stanley (2021) consider vlogs to be a form of public pedagogy, focusing on how sexual violence discourses and counter-discourses are produced, reproduced, and resisted within the digital space of YouTube. They perform a discourse analysis of nine #MeToo vlogs, finding that vloggers employ both dominant discourses and counter-discourses to situate and understand their experiences of sexual violence. Vloggers in their sample identify flaws in dominant discourses about sexual violence (i.e., women are responsible for refusing unwanted sexual contact; perpetrators are deviant and easily identifiable) producing counter-discourses (i.e., consent is complicated; perpetrators are often ordinary community members) that align better with their experiential knowledge (Almanssori & Stanley, 2021). They report that YouTube as a narrative platform enables vloggers to develop a digital networked feminist conscious through their engagements in public pedagogy.

Xiong, Cho and Boatwright (2019) use #MeToo tweets as their primary data source. Their quantitative study analyses 408 tweets that were sent from 21 social movement organizations (SMOs) in response to #MeToo between October 2017 and January 2018 to understand SMOs' engagement with their followers about #MeToo. The tweets were analyzed through semantic network analysis and correlation tests. They also trace any other hashtags that SMOs attached to their #MeToo-related tweets, to gain insight into the role of SMOs in online activism. Although Xiong et al. (2019) analyze #MeToo tweets, they focus on interactions between SMOs and #MeToo, as opposed to those between individual women and #MeToo. Moreover, authors focus on #MeToo only because of its viral success; they specify that their interest is not the contents of #MeToo tweets, but rather the strategic potential of public relations between SMOs and social media users.

Szekeres, Shuman, and Saguy (2020) examine the impact of the #MeToo movement on American public opinion about sexual violence. They analyze 500 responses to four longitudinal surveys, administering two prior to #MeToo, one at the peak of the movement, and one six months after. Szekeres et al. (2020) found decreased dismissal of sexual assault allegations following #MeToo, and disclosures were met with notably more positive responses.

Bogen, Bleiweiss, Leach, and Orchowski (2021) wanted to clarify how the hashtag was used on Twitter. They perform a qualitative analysis of 1660 randomly sampled tweets posted between October 16th and October 20th, 2017. Their analysis finds that the "who, what, where, when, why, and how" of trauma were prioritized by survivors disclosing experiences under the hashtag, and that the tweets often advocate for heightened social awareness of sexual violence (Bogen et al., 2021). In addition, they find most online reactions to these tweets in their sample were positive and attribute these positive responses to changing social attitudes about sexual violence. They demonstrate the utility of Twitter as a means of engaging in discourses about critical social issues.

Mendes et al. (2018) compare the success of #MeToo as a mode of digital feminist activism with that of the older Twitter campaign #BeenRapedNeverReported. To understand the perils and pitfalls women identify with engaging in hashtag activism, and therefore judge its success, they analyzed over 800 social media posts tagged with #BeenRapedNeverReported and interviewed 64 women who used the hashtag when it trended on Twitter in 2014, as well as 18 feminist organizers of the campaign. Participants claim that digital movements provide a system of solidarity and support for survivors that enables them to share their stories of sexual violence. However, they identify the character limit of tweets as a constraint on their ability to fully represent their

experiences (Mendes et al., 2018). They also note the toll that participating in such a campaign creates on a psychological and emotional level, which is a significant deterrent to engaging.

The organizers describe how emotionally taxing prolonged exposure to trauma can be – and how navigating this trauma resulted in multiple organizers leaving the campaign (Mendes et al., 2018). The authors emphasize that their findings about #BeenRapedNeverReported should be applicable to the #MeToo movement, given that both campaigns involve sharing personal stories of sexual violence under a uniting hashtag. This study provides some important insights into the subjective experiences of sexual assault survivors and participants in digital feminist activist campaigns, although it says little specifically about women's experiences of #MeToo.

In further research specific to the #MeToo movement, Mendes and Ringrose (2019) analyze qualitative survey responses from 117 #MeToo participants, in addition to in-depth interviews conducted with six of their respondents. Through this analysis, they seek to uncover the various motivations for participation in the movement, which include solidarity with other survivors, moral obligation, uncovering rape culture, educating men and boys, and raising awareness of the political issue of sexual violence in the public sphere (Mendes & Ringrose, 2019). Mendes and Ringrose (2019) further relate these motivations to Sarah Ahmed's (2017) concepts of the feminist snap and feminist killjoy.

In the context of #MeToo, the feminist snap or critical breaking point represents the compulsion to participate (Ahmed, 2017). "As one woman shared after joining the #MeToo hashtag: 'It felt like it was the tipping point for me. I could no longer just stand by and do nothing'" (Mendes & Ringrose, 2019, p. 40). As she snapped, hitting her breaking point for silence, she became a feminist killjoy, the unpopular figure willing to speak up and draw attention to the injustices in which others are willing to be complicit (Ahmed, 2017). In their refusal to stay silent,

participants of #MeToo evoke the feminist killjoy subject. This research, while providing detailed insight into the experiences of a small sample of women, serves to highlight the need for further research on their participation beyond their initial motivations.

Personal narratives about sexual assault experiences in the #MeToo era address this gap. Writing of this nature frequently appears in academic journals in the form of open forum pieces. Using the #MeToo movement as a frame, Stewart (2019), a professor of philosophy, reflects on her experiences of witnessing sexual harassment in the American academy, particularly in the discipline of philosophy. She does not detail her own experiences of sexual violence beyond stating that she is a survivor, and instead focuses on speaking to the collective experience of women in her discipline. She argues that many male philosophy professors have been accused of sexual misconduct with students, but they are seldom held accountable for their actions, a factor Stewart attributes to American universities seeking to avoid negative publicity. Rather, accused professors have received large cash settlements from universities in return for their resignation. Although Stewart (2019) writes about the gendered discipline of philosophy and contextualizes known experiences of sexual violence in the era of #MeToo, she does not address her own experience of the #MeToo movement.

In a second personal narrative, Chawla (2019) provides an account of her lifelong experiences of sexual harassment, which she dubs her 'me toos' before the #MeToo movement. She narrates her own experiences of sexual violence and systemic rape culture, culminating in the 2012 protests following the infamous gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh in Delhi, where Chawla was living at the time. As a recent Indian immigrant to the United States, she has not felt fully connected to the #MeToo movement. She attributes this detachment to a few factors, including an enhanced feeling of sexual safety living in the U.S. (in comparison to India) and her outsider status

as an immigrant woman of colour. She describes the Weinstein scandal as primarily involving wealthy white women, whereas she more readily identifies with Jyoti Singh. Her critique of #MeToo raises an interesting question: does #MeToo sufficiently account for the experiences of racialized women?

Racialized Critiques of #MeToo

The third analytic concern in the body of #MeToo literature relates to the racialized nature of the #MeToo movement. Tarana Burke founded the movement as a means through which Black women survivors of sexual violence could come together in a network of community support. Her initial vision emphasized the intersection between gendered and racialized violence after witnessing the specific need for support resources for survivors of colour in her local area (Page & Arcy, 2020). Critics argue that as #MeToo has developed, it has not sustained its focus on racially marginalized women (Leung & Williams, 2019; Ziyad, 2017). Rather, Black women's perspectives and needs have been sidelined in the recent iteration of the movement by the more dominant participants in #MeToo: young, white, cisgendered women (Leung & Williams, 2019). As Kagal, Cowan, and Jawad (2019, p. 136) ask, "whose experiences are represented when a movement only calls out a particular manifestation of violence, without focusing on the structural roots that allow such kinds of violence to thrive?" Scholars have begun to focus on the factors that inhibit Black women from saying 'me too', such as digital representations of victimization that perpetuate racial stereotypes and prejudices (Leung & Williams, 2019).

An example of one such study is Leung and Williams' (2019) comparative analysis of the Harvey Weinstein trial and the R. Kelly scandal. R. Kelly is a famous Black musician who, throughout the 30 years of his active career, was accused of inappropriate sexual relationships with

underage girls. In July 2017, three months before Alyssa Milano's tweet for which Weinstein was the catalyst, a news article outlining R. Kelly's predatory behavior and allegations about his underage 'sex cult' was published online. However, the Weinstein trial has overshadowed that of R. Kelly's, primarily due to the different races of the men's victims and the disproportionate media attention paid to them (Leung & Williams, 2019). Many high-profile white women celebrities have accused Weinstein of sexual assault (e.g., Uma Thurman, Angelina Jolie, and Gwyneth Paltrow) (Leung & Williams, 2019), and have been heralded as heroes by the media, dubbed 'silence breakers', and credited for #MeToo's upward momentum.

In stark contrast, R. Kelly is accused of assaulting Black women, most of whom were underage. Dominant media sources have largely ignored this scandal. But when it is covered, Leung and Williams (2019) argue that Kelly's Black victims are represented differently than Weinstein's; they were publicly shunned and represented as responsible for their assaults until the Lifetime documentary *Surviving R. Kelly* was released in 2019, nearly 2 years after #MeToo called for accountability. It remains a struggle to find positive representations of R. Kelly's survivors in mainstream media. The credibility of each group of women's accusations is entangled with their racialization; the most noticeable, respectable and therefore credible survivor of sexual violence is white (Leung & Williams, 2019).

Racial credibility also pertains to how the founders of #MeToo are discussed in popular news sources and across social media platforms (Ilinskaya & Robinson, 2018). Ilinskaya and Robinson (2018) argue that these media outlets tend to focus on the backlash Tarana Burke faced for her association with #MeToo because she is not conventionally attractive and therefore her achievements are not valid in the public eye. Conventionally attractive white women are at the forefront of media attention on #MeToo, as news coverage remains constructed through patriarchal

values. Burke's appearance itself has been the subject of many hateful online posts, which Ilinskaya and Robinson (2018) attribute to the higher levels of scrutiny Black women face in relation to their white counterparts. An online post criticizing Burke's appearance states: "I would never have laughed at her, if she hadn't 'positioned' herself in this silly role in relation to her appearance" (Illinskaya & Robinson, 2018, p. 380). In response, the authors discuss how the white founders of the second iteration, specifically Alyssa Milano, escape similar criticism because they are white but also conventionally beautiful.

A notable example of this differential treatment of #MeToo founders is Burke's absence from the 2017 *TIME* magazine cover that recognized the 'silence breakers' associated with the #MeToo movement. Magazine editors maintain that Burke's exclusion from the photo did not pertain to race because Adama Iwu, another Black woman, was featured and Burke is mentioned in the accompanying article (Ilinskaya & Robinson, 2018). However, Ziyad (2017) contends that Burke's omission from the magazine cover is another example of white people appropriating the work of Black women (Ziyad, 2017).

Nathaniel considers #MeToo as stolen property, conceptualizing media coverage following Milano's tweet as a symbolically violent appropriation of Black culture by white colonizers (2019). Nathaniel (2019) argues that Burke's erasure from #MeToo in the media also signifies ongoing systemic violence against Black women. She analyzes the events that led Burke to reclaim the movement, postulating that Burke's reluctance to lead #MeToo conceded to the need to prevent further white claims on it. Her overarching leadership, according to Nathaniel (2019), also challenges media representations of Burke as working exclusively to combat sexual violence perpetrated by Black men.

Since the TIME cover article about the #MeToo silence breakers in 2017, Tarana Burke has drawn attention to the current iteration of #MeToo and voiced concerns regarding the movements exclusion of marginalized survivors (Ison, 2019). She argues that,

What history has shown us time and again is that if marginalized voices – those of people of color, queer people, disabled people, poor people – aren't centered in our movements then they tend to become no more than a footnote. I often say that sexual violence knows no race, class, or gender, but the response to it does. 'Me too' is a response to the spectrum of gender-based violence that comes directly from survivors – all survivors. We can't afford a racialized, gendered, or classist response. Ending sexual violence and harassment will require every voice from every corner of the world. And it will require those whose voices are most often heard to find ways to amplify those voices that often go unheard. (Burke, 2017, para 11)

There is a prominent lack of structural responses to survivor needs beyond that of the 'ideal survivor'. The lack of structure to support all survivors leads to further marginalization and oppression.

The media attention Burke has been exposed to throughout #MeToo's digital popularity further emphasizes that, although many factors can impede an individual's desire to say 'me too', racialization is particularly significant for Black women (Gómez & Gobin, 2019). This impediment is due to the nature of sexual violence as an intra-racial crime, or a crime in which one is more likely to be victimized by a member of one's own racialized group than another (Jewkes et al., 2002). Gómez and Gobin (2019) have developed Cultural Betrayal Trauma Theory (CBTT) to understand this particular form of racial trauma as it is experienced by Black women in America. It is "a new framework for understanding how outcomes of interpersonal trauma, like rape, are

impacted by both victim and perpetrator(s) being subjected to inequality" (Gómez & Gobin, 2019, p. 1). They suggest that racial trauma has created a collective sense of being in the Black community in the U.S., which in turn places a burden on Black women survivors of intra-racial sexual violence. In reporting or speaking about their experiences, Black women survivors risk community backlash; by admitting to experiencing sexual violence perpetrated by Black men, they potentially deepen white prejudice against their communities. Their silence inadvertently perpetuates a culture of gendered violence. If a survivor believes that the consequences of breaking the silence are too great, then they will remain silent. It is critical to understand that the choice to remain silent may be based on perceived safety. Gómez and Gobin (2019) advocate for the relevance of CBTT for the #MeToo movement, as racial trauma complicates the landscape of Black women survivors, and these social inequalities are important in an intersectional conversation about sexual violence.

In the United States, the demographic that suffers from the highest rate of sexually violent victimization is Indigenous women and girls (Bubar, 2009; Wieskamp & Smith, 2020). According to the Native American's Health Education Resource Center (NAWHERC), rape is considered inevitable for most Indigenous women (Wieskamp & Smith, 2020, p. 72). That is, for the women at NAWHERC it is not a question of if, but when. The structural oppression fostered through ongoing settler colonialism has rendered Indigenous bodies disposable (Wieskamp & Smith, 2020).

Bubar (2013) develops a similar theory of racial trauma specific to Indigenous women. She writes that, "Indigenous women are situated in difficult intersections because solidarity to stand united against ongoing colonial influences with fellow community members and engage decolonization efforts often come at a high cost of keeping silent about their own victimization"

(Bubar, 2013, p. 526). Understanding the unique position occupied by Indigenous women is crucial to understanding the specific dynamics of breaking the silence about sexual violence for non-white survivors (Bubar, 2013).

The role of state violence in shaping sexual violence against Indigenous women and girls is integral to understanding the continued oppression of Indigenous communities. State violence is broadly defined as "ranging from direct political violence and genocide to the redefinition of state violence as the neoliberal exit of the state from the provision of social services and the covert use of new technologies of citizen surveillance" (Torres, 2018, p. 381). Because of the exclusion of state violence from statistical measurements of sexual violence, it is difficult to locate reliable data on the nature and extent of sexual violence against Indigenous communities. Despite this challenge, researchers estimate that Indigenous women and girls are about 12 times more likely to experience sexual violence than non-Indigenous women and girls (van Rijwijk, 2020).

Wieskamp and Smith (2020) analyze NAWHERC's illustrated handbook *What to do when you're raped: An ABC Handbook for Native Girls* – and in particular the rhetoric of survivance it employs to address Indigenous women's experiences of sexual violence. The ABC Handbook states that, "You are not defined by what happens to you and you have the resources and support to make your own decisions" (NAWHERC, as cited in Wieskamp & Smith, 2020). While bringing valuable attention to sexual violence against Indigenous women and girls, the handbook does not fully address the roles played by colonization and state institutions in sexual violence. As Australian researcher van Rijswijk (2020) argues, concepts like sexual violence should be redefined to address harms caused by the colonial state using decolonial praxis: "Sexual violence should be reframed as a question of Indigenous sovereignty, and, in turn, #MeToo needs to include state harms such as deaths in custody as gendered violence – to look at violence beyond 'rape,' as

it is an important political act to cut across these state histories of adjudication" (van Rijswijk, 2020, p. 251).

Van Rijswijk (2020) states that although the #MeToo movement has demonstrated that gendered harm exists and thrives in liberal institutions like schools, universities, and corporations, the movement must do more to decolonize if dismantling the structures of sexual violence is indeed #MeToo's long term goal. Satisfactory decolonization efforts could be achieved through #MeToo by raising awareness among a demographic that is affected disproportionately by sexual violence: Indigenous women and girls. This awareness building would effectively situate the #MeToo movement as a part of larger decolonial efforts.

As an extension of Bubar's (2013) theory of Indigenous cultural trauma, van Rijwijk (2020) argues that, "This is the quandary: given the legal and political overdetermination of the figure of the Aboriginal raped child/woman, it is difficult for Aboriginal women to disclose violence, without that disclosure inviting further state violence" (van Rijswijk, 2020, p. 256). When there is fear of further violence at the hands of those who are expected to help, breaking the silence becomes infinitely more complex; Indigenous women and girls are at high risk of re-victimization by law enforcement when seeking support.

The #MeToo movement has been critiqued for poor representation of marginalized communities. By failing to account for the perspectives of those most vulnerable to sexual violence, the movement inadvertently supports cisheteropatriarchal values. This problem is further emphasized through critiques of #MeToo's representation of LGBTQIA2S+ communities.

Gendered Critiques of #MeToo

It is important to recognize that although sexual violence can impact anyone in society, sexual violence disproportionately affects the lives of gender and sexual minorities. Despite their

rampant victimization, queer communities have been notably excluded from the dominant narrative of the #MeToo movement. Scholars have identified several reasons for this exclusion, all rooted in cisheteropatriarchy; the supremacy, dominance, and privilege of straight, cisgender male subjects over all social Others (Arkles, 2018; Hsu, 2019; Ison, 2019). Under cisheteropatriarchy, queer bodies are simply not socially intelligible as victims. Gender and sexual minorities have historically been denied agency – and therefore voice – under cisheteropatriarchal social arrangements (Serano, 2016).

Excluding queer experiences of sexual violence is not exclusive to the #MeToo movement. Gender and sexual minorities have historically been excluded from statistical measures of sexual violence, including research initiatives (Ison, 2019; Serano, 2016). This omission serves to deepen the oppression of the groups most at-risk for sexual violence, particularly for transgender and nonbinary individuals. Statistics from the 2015 Transgender Survey from the National Center for Transgender Equality demonstrate that in the United States more than one in three trans women and one in two trans men have been sexually assaulted during their lifetime (Arkles, 2018). These numbers, although approximations based on self-report measures, increase drastically when considering the wide variety of behaviours that fall under the umbrella term of sexual violence. "Trans people of colour are disproportionately affected by sexual violence. So are trans people who have done sex work, who have been homeless, and who have disabilities. Many trans survivors face painful barriers when they seek visibility or support" (Arkles, 2018, para 3).

Transgender people are more likely to work in high-risk fields of precarious employment such as the military and sex work – two fields with notably increased risk of institutional sexual violence (Arkles, 2018). In addition, they are more likely to experience job insecurity, police

harassment, and homelessness. They face adversity because queer communities, like Indigenous

peoples, are particularly vulnerable to state violence when interacting with police (Hsu, 2019).

Trans folks comprise an exceptionally vulnerable community as they are often targeted simply

for being trans (Arkles, 2018). In North America, they are incarcerated at six times the rate of

cisgender people (Hsu, 2019). Intersectional factors increase individual risk, as trans people of

colour experience additional adversity.

Intersectionality demonstrates the dissonance between marginalized and 'ideal' survivors.

Hsu argues that, "The stories of many people of color, queer, transgender, poor, and/or disabled

folks remain inarticulable within a retributive system that requires survivors to narrate

themselves as 'perfect victims'" (2019, p. 269).The 'perfect victim' standard Hsu (2019)

discusses refers to the rape myth of the 'ideal survivor', as informed by cisheteropatriarchy. The

'ideal survivor' as depicted by this myth is a white, chaste, heterosexual woman. Hsu (2019)

critiques the #MeToo movement for adopting this myth, and advocates for the #MeToo

movement in practice to adopt aspects of critical trans theory to better include all survivors –

including all sexual and gender minorities who defy the standard set by the 'ideal survivor' rape

myth. This recommendation then extends to victim services and survivor support systems, as

Hsu (2019) explains, they often inadvertently promote cisheteropatriarchal values and practices.

Ison (2019) identifies several silencing factors unique to queer survivors of sexual

violence. Primarily, resources for survivors perpetuate heteronormativity and reinforce

assumptions about the 'ideal survivor' rape myth. This occurs because the resources themselves,

like sexual assault centres, were created specifically to support heterosexual cisgender women

survivors. While these women survivors comprise a social group highly at-risk for sexual

violence, queer, non-binary, and trans survivors who do not meet these criteria often receive cis-

heterocentric responses when seeking support – which can be detrimental to their healing (Ison, 2019). Cisheterosexism can act as a direct silencer for gender and sexual minorities – particularly for transgender individuals (Ison, 2019). Even when resources specifically cater to queer communities, there are often additional risks involved as the vulnerability of queer survivors has historically been exploited by those in power (Ison, 2019).

Cisheterosexism further alienates queer survivors, because its assumptions about survivor culpability, based on conceptions about their sexual partners and lifestyles, serve to marginalize and oppress them (Ison, 2019). For example, survivor services often frame sexual violence as something that exclusively occurs within monogamous relationships, with the singular exception of stranger-perpetrated acts (Ison, 2019). Queer lifestyles and relationships do not strictly adhere to the monogamous standard set by cisheteropatriarchal society. As a result, queer sexual relations are often considered 'risky'. By choosing to engage in 'risky' sexual behaviors, social norms suggest that the victim is responsible for their own violation (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019; Ison, 2019).

Queer communities are further marginalized by rape myths pertaining to the impossibility of their victimization. The exclusion of marginalized communities from the #MeToo movement reinforces and reproduces societal mechanisms of marginalization that permit sexual violence to thrive (Johnson & Renderos, 2020). In this sense, the media attention garnered by the white, conventionally attractive celebrity women of #MeToo enables a narrative that erases the intersectional experiences of those most as risk for sexual violence: queer, non-binary and transgender folks, Indigenous peoples, and people of colour. Scholars suggest that excluding these experiences amplifies white voices at the expense of others. This exclusion can inadvertently exacerbate the oppression of marginalized groups in society.

Radical change will not come from listening exclusively to the experiences of the privileged. McKinney (2021) argues that the exclusion of marginalized voices from #MeToo should be understood as a starting point, given that "their current exclusion or subordination is a stark reminder that Me Too is intervening in a world only partially transformed by feminist activism and thus has to contend with the same restraints that mark progressive activism" (p. 90). Scholars advocate for the inclusion of marginalized gendered and racialized experiences of sexual violence under #MeToo, as they believe this inclusivity can help the movement address larger systemic issues of sexism, cissexism, and cisheteropatriarchy.

Zarkov and Davis (2018) recommend shifting focus to the overarching structure of violence because the #MeToo movement has created a space for 'trial by social media'. Those accused of sexual violence are often subject to 'cancel culture' before they have been given an opportunity to react to the allegations and defend themselves. The term cancel culture refers to the modern phenomenon of social cancellation. Through this process, individuals are 'cancelled' online when the public perceives social injustices and calls for those responsible to be held accountable for their actions (Zarkov & Davis, 2018). This cancellation often results in mass public resistance of the individual – typically a celebrity – and boycotts of their work. Although it is crucial to hold public figures accountable, cancel culture does not allow for acknowledging and subsequently improving poor behavior following revelations of injustice. The authors recommend that #MeToo recognize the difference between making a single perpetrator visible and making the larger societal problem of sexual violence visible:

> Making powerful men as perpetrators and young, beautiful women celebrities visible as
> victims carries a danger of forgetting that sexual harassment, assault, and violence are very
> much part of everyday life of many different women and men. And that when feminists

> say it is a matter of 'power relations' we do not actually reduce this power to a number of powerful men. (Zarkov & Davis, 2018, p. 6)

While it is important to hold individual perpetrators accountable for their actions, looking beyond them to the larger power structures that enable sexually violent behavior is a more productive direction for #MeToo in terms of inciting long-term change. The movement's website addresses this issue in the new *Vision and Theory of Change* section and the focus has shifted to prioritize individual survivor healing (Me Too movement, 2021b). Still, media attention remains dedicated to amplifying the voices that fit the 'ideal survivor' rape myth. Continued resistance to this rape myth and all others is vital, and the social groups most at risk for sexual violence must be more fully represented in any movement that seeks to dismantle the overarching structures that enable sexual violence to persist.

Conclusion

Breaking the silence is critical for enacting social change because the structures enabling the pervasive problem of sexual violence must be resisted for change to occur. The #MeToo movement has been instrumental in inciting resistance, particularly by creating a network of solidarity that empowers survivors through empathy to break their individual silences while developing a collective voice for change, as is the movement's primary goal (Me Too movement, 2021b; Suk et al., 2021). As this literature review demonstrates, #MeToo's emphasis on communicating the parameters of sexual violence and talking about experiences of it in a digital format that is widely accessible is a significant intervention in a culture of institutional silence, thereby disrupting a key aspect of the cycle of sexual violence.

Although research has examined the impacts #MeToo is having on the practices and policies of various social institutions and its racialized and gendered character, there remains a significant lack of attention to women's firsthand, multifaceted *experiences* of the movement in relation to breaking the silence about sexual violence (Quan-Haase et al., 2021). As silence is a structural element of sexual violence, the notion of breaking it is vital to conversations about #MeToo and women's experiences of the digital social movement. By addressing the question of how women experience #MeToo as a digital feminist social movement that attempts to break the silence about sexual violence, I investigate how women are engaging with and thinking about the movement, what benefits and drawbacks they identify with participating in this form of feminist activism, and how they imagine other survivors may be affected by #MeToo participants' experiential narratives about sexual violence. But before I undertake that analysis, I outline the details of my research methodology, including the collection and analysis of 12 #MeToo vlogs, in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: Methodology

As a digital feminist social movement, #MeToo's accessibility to anyone with an internet

connection enables widespread, if not unrestricted engagement for survivors of sexual violence.

Many women have shared their experiences under the hashtag #MeToo across social media

platforms, including Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook. They have also begun to post

online video blogs (vlogs) about their experiences. I decided to focus this project on women's

experiences of sexual violence because they comprise a demographic that statistically and

historically has been at high risk of victimization (Jewkes et al., 2002). My research poses five

questions about such vlogs posted by women on YouTube:

1) How do women represent their experiences of #MeToo as a digital feminist social movement

   that aims to break the silence about sexual violence and thereby resist this pervasive social

   problem?

2) How do women in this online forum represent #MeToo's affordances that enable them to

   communicate and make sense of their experiences of sexual violence?

3) How do these women represent the goals of #MeToo?

4) What drawbacks do women identify with the movement in relation to breaking the silence

   about sexual violence?

5) How do women understand their engagement with #MeToo as a mechanism of silence-

   breaking that affects other survivors of sexual violence?

By qualitatively analyzing 12 of these vlogs, I aim to understand how participants of #MeToo

experience and conceptualize this digital feminist social movement. Vlog data allow me to gain

insight into the multidimensional perspectives of #MeToo participants, including how they think

the movement has influenced their public voicings of experiences of sexual violence and how

their engagement with #MeToo may affect other survivors of sexual violence. Vloggers also

represent the goals of #MeToo, as they experience them in their online postings, which I discuss

in detail in Chapter Five. I am particularly interested in understanding how women identify and

resist the mechanisms of silence that structure their experiences of sexual violence and what

drawbacks they identify in relation to breaking the silence. In this chapter I outline the rationale

for employing a qualitative research methodology and analytic method to study these questions,

as well as the ethical considerations pertaining to this study, and the obstacles I faced during the

research process.

Research Design and Rationale

I employed a qualitative methodology because I am interested in understanding the lived

experiences of women survivors and their perceptions of sexual violence, the #MeToo

movement, and the movement's relationship to breaking the silence surrounding sexual violence.

While quantitative research purports to examine an 'objective' reality, qualitative research aims

to understanding subjective human experiences from an insider's perspective (Esterberg, 2002),

which is fundamental to my research questions. A qualitative research methodology allows me to

investigate women's experiences as represented through their vlog narratives, consider the

subjective process of research, and examine how knowledge is contextually understood

(Esterberg, 2002). As Esterberg (2002, p. 2) argues, "Instead of trying to extract abstract

categories from social phenomena, as quantitative scholars do, qualitative researchers try to

understand social processes in *context*. In addition, qualitative researchers pay attention to the

subjective nature of human life – not only the subjective experiences of those that they are

studying, but also the subjectivity of the researchers themselves." Through this thesis, I seek to

understand what meaning survivors participating in #MeToo attribute to the social event of breaking the silence. To achieve this objective, I analyze their experiential narratives in the context of participating in #MeToo and breaking the silence about experiencing sexual violence.

Contextualizing myself in this thesis is also important. My interest in this research is academic, but also personal. Seeing #MeToo trend online back in 2017 was deeply impactful for me as an ally and for my friends and family as the virality and accessibility prompted critical conversations about sexual violence in my own life. I consider this positionality to be an asset because my passion for this topic was a key motivator when the work became emotionally difficult.

When designing this project, I chose to use vlogs as a data source, given that the #MeToo movement primarily exists online. Survivors participating in #MeToo post their experiences under the hashtag across social media platforms. Compared to other social media forms, vlogs offer women the ability to richly articulate personal experiences of sexual violence in their own words, in an extended format, without specific prompts. Vloggers provide titles for their videos, which are also tagged with the #MeToo hashtag, so these videos appear in search results for the #MeToo movement. Vlogs are posted to online video sharing platforms, the most popular choice being YouTube. They are easily accessible, freely available, and often upwards of 20 minutes in length. Vloggers who associate their videos with the #MeToo hashtag usually indicate in video content that the #MeToo movement is the catalyst for sharing their experiences of sexual violence. The vlogs provide insight into my research questions without risking re-traumatization of the vulnerable population of sexual violence survivors, as is often risked in interview-based methodologies.

However, choosing this method of data collection comes with two analytic constraints. Primarily, the women do not self-identify in relation to their race, class, and sexuality. Rather than risk the symbolic violence of reading these characteristics onto their bodies, I did not perform an intersectional analysis. The limited survivor demographics that are available can be referenced in Appendix A. Further information could be collected through interview-based research where self-identification would be possible. The second constraint is the focus on those speaking out online. Although I appreciate the ways that survivors unable to speak out participate in #MeToo, this methodology does not allow me to discuss the experiences of survivors who remain silent.

In thinking through the ethical dimensions of this study, I have consulted the Office of Research Services' ethical guidelines for research employing online data sources. According to these guidelines, my research did not require Research Ethics Board approval because vloggers who post videos on publicly accessible social media sites do so without an expectation of privacy. In the words of the Tri-Council Policy Statement for Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (2018), ethical review is "not required where research uses exclusively information in the public domain that may contain identifiable information, and for which there is no reasonable expectation of privacy" (p. 16). Furthermore, YouTube's site guidelines stipulate that users of the site cannot expect privacy, and that posted videos are to be considered publicly accessible with uncontrolled viewing. However, I draw on the epistemological and ethical considerations that Patterson (2018) discusses in her reflections on the use of YouTube videos in academic research.

Patterson (2018) identifies some key tensions in using YouTube videos for research, such as getting to know the subjects who produced the digital data. This tension pertains to building

trust in a context where subjects have limited agency; the women have agency over the contents

and posting of their vlog, but no further input into how they might be studied or how their stories

are portrayed. Patterson (2018) describes the difficulty of navigating the researcher-subject

power dynamic in this online, one-sided space, and suggests researchers engage in intentional

listening, increased reflexivity, and transparency to mitigate the risk of disassociating narratives

from their authors. One of her particularly useful suggestions was to watch other videos posted

by selected participants and read their public comments to become more familiar with their

personas in an online context. I employed this technique wherever possible, and I found that it

allowed for a deeper if not intimate connection with and understanding of my digital participants.

Data Collection and Transcription

YouTube vlogs associated with the #MeToo hashtag constitute my research data. I selected 12

English language vlogs posted by a variety of women across race, age, and sexuality, using a

purposive sampling approach. I did not limit my geographic focus and instead filtered by

popularity, so selected vlogs are not associated with a specific spatial location. Most of the vlogs

did originate from the United States, apart from one United Kingdom vlogger (see Appendix A

for participant demographics). Using the YouTube search engine, I input the hashtag '#MeToo'

followed by keywords 'my experience.' I then sorted the videos using 'View Count' and limited

the upload date to 'This Year.' Sorting the videos by 'View Count' sorted the results in order of

most to least watched. Limiting the upload date to 'This Year' ensured that my dataset consisted

of vlogs posted between September 10th, 2019 and September 10th, 2020, with the former being

the date of collection. Using an amalgam of these filtering options, I was able to find the most

viewed vlogs posted on YouTube under my search criteria within the past year.

As I moved through the search results generated by these filters, I had a few selection criteria to consider. Primarily, I wanted to select vlogs posted by women as they comprise the demographic most at risk for sexual violence (Jewkes et al., 2002). Secondly, I sought vlogs that described at least one experience in detail because my analysis would be limited to their contents, and I would not be able to ask follow-up questions. Therefore, I omitted vlogs that did not comprehensively address an experience of sexual violence or participation in #MeToo. I selected 12 vlogs from these search results, with view counts ranging from 44,481 (Vlog 1) to 495 (Vlog 12). Filtering by view count allowed me to get a sense of how popular #MeToo vlogs have been among YouTube audiences nearly two years after the movement initially trended on Twitter. This measure of popularity can help give a sense of the movement's longevity and continued impact, as the hashtag remains prevalent online today.

I took methodological direction from several published studies that have used YouTube videos as data. For example, Alston and Ellis-Harvey (2014) used 30 vlogs posted on YouTube to understand Black women's interpretations of natural hair. They also employed a purposive sampling technique to target videos that best met their selection criteria. However, they imported their vlogs into NVivo 10 Qualitative Data Analysis Software, opting to embed the videos into the program and code directly on them, using video timestamps instead of text transcripts to organize the video contents. Their data set is nearly triple the size of mine, so they used computer coding techniques instead of a more hands-on method of developing themes. This study also brought particular transcription issues to my attention. Alston and Ellis-Harvey (2014) and Bezemer and Mavers (2011) emphasize the importance of noting vocal articulations, pauses, and other intonations in vlog speech, as well as of devising a system for translating emotions, slang, and sarcasm into written scripts of the vlog. Bezemer and Mavers's (2011) 'multi-modal

transcribing' technique also provides guidance on describing women's gestures, body language, and facial expressions.

Following their guidelines, I started the transcription process by watching each vlog in its entirety. I transcribed the vlogs verbatim; collecting visual data, documenting body language, facial expressions, gestures, and the room layout to capture all potentially valuable contextual data in the process. Analyzing the visual data helped ensure my representations of their experiences were as genuine as possible, particularly because I was not able to meet the vloggers. As I progressed through the transcription process, the notable actions and expressions became more evident. However, the vlogs were all filmed with the survivor close to the camera and sitting statically, so there was limited contextual data to collect. Transcribing helped to acquaint me quickly with the data.

To keep record of the data, I downloaded the vlogs and took screenshots of their appearance in my filtered search results. This strategy was important, it turned out, as Vlogs 4, 8, and 10 are no longer publicly available on YouTube; users have deleted, unlisted, or privatized their vlogs[1]. Fortunately, this loss of online data occurred after much of the thesis was already written and did not present an obstacle during the process.

A major obstacle that I have faced throughout the writing of this thesis is the global pandemic. All meetings with my supervisor and supervisory committee were virtual from March 2020 onwards. All selection, transcription, analysis, and writing for this project has taken place at home. Adapting to these unexpected circumstances came with its own set of new challenges to overcome. Luckily, the design of this project did not require in-person interactions, making it optimal for remote work. However, working almost exclusively from my bedroom proved to be

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[1] All vlogs have been anonymized to protect the identities of the vloggers.

difficult – particularly while trying to become intimately acquainted with my data. I am fortunate to have a strong support system in my family as they helped me navigate this difficult time. My supervisor was also an excellent motivator throughout this process.

The global pandemic was not the only unexpected hurdle encountered during the research process. Engaging with the vlogs became difficult at times due to their sensitive contents. Transcribing moments of heavy emotion and trauma was difficult, particularly because each vlog had to be watched multiple times, both to confirm the accuracy of the transcript and to collect as much information as possible as I could not physically meet the vloggers and wanted to ensure accuracy in my representations of their experiences. Initially, I did not account for this difficulty, and this led to emotional burn-out. I wanted to engage deeply with the videos but not at the expense of my mental health. So, to adapt, I took frequent breaks throughout the transcription process. This approach worked well, and I was able to finish transcribing accurately, and am confident that I have appropriately represented each experience.

Analysis

I used a two-step process for coding, as described by Esterberg (2002). First, I printed the 12 transcripts and went through each one, line by line, using an open coding technique. As the word 'open' suggests, I tried to remain receptive to anything in my data that might develop into a potential theme – regardless of its direct applicability to my initial research questions. My goal was to immerse myself in the data and familiarize myself with each vlog. Once I noticed commonalities, I began developing codes. At this stage, I had around 25 codes – many of which were combined to become themes after a process of more focused coding.

Focused coding, the second step of the process, entailed going through the data a second time with deeper attention to codes that emerged through the first open-coding process (Esterberg, 2002). Once I completed this pass through, I wrote all the codes and quotes on index cards and sorted them into piles. Physically sorting these cards allowed me to easily visualize my data. I condensed similar codes together into piles, and these piles became my themes. I then created a document with all the relevant quotes listed under their corresponding theme. Some quotes are relevant to multiple themes. From this inductive coding process, 16 themes emerged: silencing, negative social reactions, self-blame, guilt, rationalization, PTSD, suicidal ideation, strategic inefficiency, choosing not to pursue the complaint further (case burn out), voice, resistance, survivor solidarity, offering support, denial of perpetrator guilt, rape myths, and the emotional burden of disclosure. I develop these themes in the following two analytic chapters, where themes have been combined to comprehensively address my research questions.

Chapter Four focuses on women's experiences of sexual violence in relation to mechanisms of silencing. I return to the relationship between sexual violence and silencing mechanisms vloggers link to their experiences of violence and develop themes of negative social reactions, self-blame and guilt, rationalization, PTSD and suicidal ideation, strategic inefficiency, and case burn out into a typology of four silencing mechanisms: social reactions, internalized rape myths, emotional and psychological trauma, and barriers to justice. Chapter Five considers how vloggers represent #MeToo's goals as well as the potential to disrupt and recuperate these silencers through themes of voice, resistance, survivor solidarity, offering support, denial of perpetrator guilt, rape myths, and the emotional burden of disclosure. I further categorize these themes in discussion of the movement's possibility of producing a network of solidarity among survivors and positive experiences for participants, and the healing and

resistance potential of #MeToo as represented by vloggers. I explore vloggers representations of the #MeToo movement's goals and their anticipated effect on other survivors through voice, survivor solidarity, and resistance. I also analyze the negative outcomes of participating including the emotional burden of disclosure, perpetuation of rape myths, and denial of perpetrator guilt.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I delineated the research design and rationale for my methodological choices in addition to describing the process of data collection, transcription, and analysis. Watching #MeToo vlogs allowed me to gain insight into women's lived experiences of sexual violence and of participating in the digital social movement. I developed 16 themes through the analytic process. I engage these themes in conversation with the research questions further in Chapters Four and Five.

Analyzing vlogs posted under #MeToo has helped me understand how individual women think and feel about the digital social movement. Through participating in #MeToo, women identify mechanisms of silence structuring their experiences of sexual violence, resist these mechanisms, and encourage other survivors to do the same. I have analyzed the insights developed through my engagement with the vlogs and, in the following chapters, I engage these insights in conversation with the literature on sexual violence, silencing, voice, trauma, and the #MeToo movement. Amplifying women's lived experiences of sexual violence is critical. I hope to further amplify the voices of the #MeToo movement through this research.

Chapter Four: Understanding the Silence

Silencing – a process of minimizing and therefore normalizing men's sexual violence against women – is a structural element of sexual violence systemically condoned and perpetuated by a broad array of social institutions and social actors (Kelly & Radford, 1990). As such, the notion of *breaking* sexual violence-related silences is vital to understanding the significance of women's vlog representations of sexual violence and #MeToo; women use their vlogs to break their own silences – for the first time or for the hundredth time – and resist a key component of the structure of sexual violence in the process. Their vlog representations of their experiences of sexual violence and silencing signify #MeToo as a significant vehicle enabling the identification and resistance of structures of sexual violence. Women vloggers identify and resist mechanisms of silence that structure their experiences of sexual violence and advocate for other survivors to identify and resist these mechanisms in their own lives. My goal in this chapter is to build an understanding of how women vloggers represent their experiences of sexual violence, silencing, and their engagement with #MeToo. I am interested in building this understanding as this may, in turn, allow me to explore the degree to which such representations enable them to resist sexual violence, break their silences, and thereby resist sexual violence.

More specifically, in this chapter I delineate the mechanisms that women identify in their #MeToo vlogs as barriers to breaking their silence about their experiences of sexual violence, which the digital movement enables them to articulate, share with others, and resist themselves. I develop a typology of four silencing mechanisms based on my analysis of their representations: social reactions, internalized rape myths, emotional and psychological trauma, and barriers to justice. Social reactions include all responses women vloggers receive upon disclosing their experiences of sexual violence. Social reactions to disclosure have tremendous impact on survivor

recovery, and a negative social reaction has the potential to silence a survivor indefinitely (Ahrens, 2006). Internalized rape myths concern the vlogger's feelings in the aftermath of violence as they navigate social relationships and resist cultural narratives about sexual violence that emphasize survivor culpability. Survivors often experience self-devaluing feelings of blame and guilt as they try to rationalize and understand their violation, so that "victim-blaming rape myths frequently magnify and deepen the original wounds" (Moor, 2007, p. 19). Emotional and psychological trauma refers to the negative psychological consequences of experiencing sexual violence that vloggers discuss, such as PTSD, suicidal ideation, and subsequent maladaptive coping mechanisms. Finally, the category of barriers to justice pertains to the silencing influence of the criminal justice system, particularly through the means of strategic inefficiency and case burn-out. Delineating and analyzing these silencing mechanisms in more detail below allows me to describe the adverse effects that silencing has on survivors and explain how women represent their experiences of sexual violence and of #MeToo as a digital feminist social movement that aims to break the silence about this violence and as a way to resist it.

Social Reactions

Social reactions are the responses survivors receive when they disclose their experiences of sexual violence to others. A reaction to a disclosure of sexual violence can be understood as a mechanism of silencing because a negative reaction serves as a deterrent to further disclosure of the violence, which then conceals and perpetuates it (Ullman, 2000; Ahrens, 2006). Feminist theorists have identified a range of negative reactions women typically experience from others in the aftermath of sexual violence; stigma, denial, and blaming are mechanisms of social exclusion that minimize,

normalize, and silence women's experiences of sexual violence (Ullman, 2000; Ahrens, 2006; Kennedy & Prock, 2018).

'Stigma' refers to negative social perceptions of survivors. The stigmatization of survivors deters them from disclosing their experiences in detail and breaking their silences about the violence (Ahrens, 2006; Kennedy & Prock, 2018). Even *anticipated* stigma can hinder disclosure and silence the survivor. A social reaction of 'denial' occurs when a survivor's account is not accepted as true. Denial reactions also include denying that the assault was non-consensual, denying survivors access to support services, and denying perpetrator guilt (Ahrens, 2006). 'Blaming' refers to a circumstance in which a survivor is held responsible for their own assault. Research demonstrates that survivors are likely to be blamed following an experience of sexual violence no matter the specific conditions of their experience (Ahrens, 2006). Statements like "If you're dressed like that, then you were asking for it" or "What did you expect staying over at another person's house" exemplify blaming responses. Women #MeToo vloggers in my sample identify and describe these mechanisms of silencing and their ramifications as they recount their own experiences of disclosing sexual violence.

Disclosure, as defined by Riggs (2021), is not only the act of sharing information, but the first step towards survivor recovery. The first response survivors receive upon sharing their experiences of sexual violence is instrumental to the healing process as it significantly impacts whether they will continue to disclose or repress the experience. A negative response to a first disclosure has the potential to silence the survivor and exacerbate feelings of shame and guilt (Ahrens, 2006; Riggs, 2021), and the act of silencing is a deterrent to sharing an experience of sexual violence, whether that act be physical, verbal, or implied.

Tina speaks to the immediate response she received from her sorority sisters when she divulged details about a fraternity brother who assaulted her at a Greek party over Superbowl weekend. When she told them she wanted to report her assault to the police, their response "basically kinda like scared me into not saying anything … they basically told me like 'Think of the consequences, like the people that could get in trouble for this'" (Tina, 2020, 6:49). After surviving a second assault the same weekend, her sorority sisters continued along the same vein: "…my friends came over… they kinda told me again, scared me into not really saying anything and… I didn't" (Tina, 2020, 11:46). Tina's experience is an example of both a negative social reaction to disclosure and a deliberate act of silencing; her sorority sisters acknowledged the assaults and the harm caused, yet implored her to think of the consequences that seeking justice would have on her assailants. Although she eventually decided to report her experience to the authorities, her friends' unsupportive reactions to her disclosure of sexual violence nearly silenced her.

Heidi reminisces about disclosing her assault at a party to a trusted friend, who happened to have romantic feelings for her assailant. The friend proceeded to tell her that, given her drunken behavior with her assailant at the party, it was clear she was interested in him and therefore any sexual activity between them was consensual. She says:

> Because I didn't share that story with anyone else, her response was the only response that I heard. And so I thought that was like majority says, yeah, it's my fault. […] Her opinion was the only one that I heard. So when I read what a rape apologist was, I not only realized that that's what she was but also that I've been around that my whole life. And the more I think about it, I wish I would've shared that story more. With other people that cared about me more than they cared about that guy. (Heidi, 2020, 15:57)

According to Heidiand @heal.and.chill, an Instagram account established in 2019 after #MeToo that provides resources to sexual violence survivors, a rape apologist is a person who in any way attempts to justify, minimize, or rationalize sexual violence.

Heidi claims that, prior to filming her vlog, she did not share the details of her experience with anyone in the years since this initial disclosure solely because of her friend's reaction. By invalidating her experience, her friend instilled feelings of doubt in Heidi, as she began to wonder whether her experience qualified as sexual violence. She reflects:

What happened after that sexual assault was … the first person I told, the girl told me not to talk about it again. So, I don't know- not to like attack girls. I mean, I'm sure if I told a guy first too, maybe, maybe I'd also get the incorrect response, which is to tell the person who is hurt that they shouldn't hurt, and that what they say doesn't matter, but it would be better for everyone if you keep it inside. That is never, ever, ever the case. (Heidi, 2020, 22:20)

Heidi's experience is illustrative of the immense power a negative social reaction can have on a survivor seeking support. Because her friend denied her experience and invalidated her claim of non-consent, she accepted and internalized this opinion. Heidi maintained her silence until #MeToo provided her with community support and the digital opportunity to break it by articulating in detail her experiences of sexual violence in the context of that support.

Kate had a similar invalidating experience when she initially disclosed her assault to a close friend. She had been drinking and was drugged by her assailants during a shot party. They proceeded to lay her down in the back room and take turns assaulting her. Calling her friend from the parking lot after the assault, Kate recalls that, "…she was like: 'Yeah, girl it was your fault.

You knew that was gonna happen. You know how you are when you drink'" (Kate, 2019, 25:03).

This response silenced her immediately. She continues:

> I've been holding it in for 5 years, almost 6 years. And majority of my friends don't know, my family don't know. Like my sister knows, some of my friends know, and some guys that I, you know, messed with in the past know because like, how I used to act towards them. I remember this one guy told me, he was like, 'That's not an excuse.' …That really messed me up too. 'Cause I'm sitting here telling you this, and you're sitting here telling me that's not an excuse when you asked why I do certain things … So that's when I really stopped telling guys. Like I just stopped telling them anything because I didn't want anybody to try to victim shame me. (Kate, 2019, 26:54)

Her friend's unsupportive reaction silenced Kate, shamed her, and caused her to feel responsible for her assault. The negative responses that Kate received when disclosing instilled fear in her, and this fear of further shame prevented her from sharing her violent experiences with others. Until she posted her #MeToo vlog, Kate states that she had not recounted the events in detail since the night they occurred – nearly 6 years before the date of her vlog post. At the end of her vlog, Kate describes feeling like a weight has been lifted off her shoulders: "I needed to get [my story] out and this was my way of getting it out. This is my safe space of getting it out" (48:44). She explicitly recognizes the importance of posting her vlog publicly under #MeToo, pointing to the larger virtual domain created by the movement that facilitates breaking the silence.

Vloggers claim that negative responses from family have the same silencing effect as those from friends (Ahrens, 2006). After disclosing that she was molested as a child by a neighbour, Leslie's brother scolded her for sharing her experience, because it caused their mother 'unnecessary' pain. She was "honestly looking to report the neighbour because we still have the

old address and I can just point out where he's lived, because I don't know if he's doing it to anyone else. But after my brother said those words to me, I stopped looking for ways to track that guy down. I stopped talking about it" (Leslie, 2020, 15:13). Leslie was immediately silenced by her brother's reaction and internalized his opinion, choosing not to share this information further or pursue some form of formal justice. As her brother prioritized her mother's feelings, Leslie began to doubt whether she should have disclosed her experiences to anyone.

Tina, Heidi, Kate, and Leslie all speak to the experience of being directly silenced by trusted friends and family members, which involves having the feelings of other people prioritized ahead of their own. Receiving negative social reactions from family, friends, or other support providers can have tremendous impacts on the survivor's psychological adjustment and subsequent recovery (Ullman, 2000; Ahrens, 2006; Riggs, 2021). The experience can often be so traumatic that it feels like a second assault, a phenomenon that researchers have dubbed 'secondary victimization' (Williams, 1984; Ahrens, 2006). The decision to disclose is consequently rendered 'unthinkable' for some survivors. The vloggers use #MeToo as a vehicle to break their 'unthinkable' silences in the virtual domain; allowing them to articulate their experiences and resist the structures of sexual violence.

Rachel describes her experience after gossip about her assault circulated through her high school. At her first party as a freshman, she got drunk for the first time and her friends tucked her into the host's bed. She woke to her assailant, a popular boy from the swim team, penetrating her vaginally. In the days following her assault, she faked ill to stay home from school and avoid her classmates. When she returned, the story of her assault had been given a life of its own: "Everybody just loved the story that they just kept going at it and kept talking about it. And no one

would talk to me, but they would talk blatantly like right in front of me" (Rachel, 2019, 13:21). It did not take long for the story of her assault to reach school administrators.

She was called down to the principal's office during class, where her mother was waiting to question her with the police. Rachel was taken completely off guard. She had not yet disclosed her experience to her mother. She describes the feeling of dread as her assailant, his friends and other peers were called in for questioning: "It just became this really serious matter. And after a really long time of being interrogated at the school I was released back to class. I was able to go, but it wasn't until they arrested him in his classroom. And I just remembered thinking like if everybody didn't know before, everybody's gonna know now" (Rachel, 2019, 20:43). Everyone noticed the police presence on campus. Rachel's friends told her they were not willing to testify on her behalf in court because they did not want to be excluded from future parties as killjoys; feminist killjoys being the unpopular figures who draw attention to injustices in which others remain complicit (Ahmed, 2017). In the days following her assailant's arrest, his friends and classmates harassed her to the breaking point and Rachel dropped out of high school.

The loss of Rachel's friends and torment by her peers resulted from disclosure. Their negative social reactions to the voicing of her experience caused her to feel unsupported and alone. Such negative reactions can leave survivors feeling invalidated or doubting whether their experience was as negative as they initially perceived (Ullman, 2000; Ahrens, 2006; Ahrens, Stansell, & Jennings, 2010; Riggs, 2021). Receiving negative reactions can lead to internalized rape myths, expressed through self-blame and guilt, as the survivor accepts and internalizes the opinions of others. These feelings are powerful silencers that I discuss in detail next.

Internalized Rape Myths

Survivors' behaviors and choices do not indicate consent or responsibility, despite the persistence of rape myths that suggest otherwise such as "If you dress like that, then you're asking for it", "You must have led them on", and "Nice girls don't get raped" (Moor, 2007). Internalizing rape myths involves believing these detrimental fallacies, which ultimately leads to a distorted perception of the self. Rationalization occurs when survivors attempt to justify sexual violence through statements supporting rape myths like, "It could have been worse", "I should have been able to resist", and "I didn't explicitly say 'No'. Maybe they thought I consented".

Guilt and self-blame are identified as consequences of internalizing and accepting rape myths (Moor, 2007). According to Moor (2007), the concept of guilt refers to a survivor feeling responsible for experiencing sexual violence, while self-blame is the belief that the experience occurred because of a survivor's actions. The vloggers in my sample demonstrate that these self-devaluing thoughts and feelings can be powerful silencers, supported and fuelled by the internalized negative social reactions and opinions of others. All 12 women acknowledge feelings of guilt or self-blame for 'allowing' their assault to occur, and these feelings are often attributed to and exacerbated by the responses of those around them.

Linda describes an experience she had when she was 12 years old, after falling asleep watching a movie at a family get-together. She woke to her assailant reaching across the body of his sleeping sister to push up her clothes and molest her. Thinking back, "…for the longest time, I blamed myself. Like why didn't I fight, you know? But it's like I didn't know how" (Linda, 2020, 12:57). She describes walking to her sister's house immediately following her molestation, feeling ashamed of her inaction and deeply afraid of anyone in her family finding out.

This fear was informed by the reactions she received a few months prior after she had been molested at a different party. In this instance, her assailant's mother found out and began to shame her, "telling me how I wanted that and it was my fault because of what I was wearing. A fucking tank top. And she was telling me like it was me. Like why would I ask for it? No I didn't. I was fucking 11 years old" (Linda, 2020, 9:40). Linda now struggles with trusting men and reports a constant fear of being attacked. She describes how #MeToo and local community support have helped her to alleviate some of the guilt and self-blame she feels, but she also acknowledges the long road to recovery ahead.

In a vlog recounting experiences of sexual violence throughout her life, Leslie considers an encounter for which she still feels equally responsible. While on a family vacation when she was 11 or 12 years old, her assailant climbed into the bed she was sharing with his daughter and slipped his hand under her tank top to grope her chest. She remembers "…counting down from 10 that I would move or go to the restroom or just pretend that I was waking up. But [when I reached 10] I couldn't and even 'til this day I kind of regret that I allowed it to happen and I'm sure a lot of people regret allowing these situations to happen, but ... it's not your fault" (Leslie, 2020, 6:14). After some time, her assailant released her, claiming he mistook her for his wife in the dark.

Both Linda and Leslie report blaming themselves for not being able to protect themselves, even for experiences that occurred when they were children. These feelings of self-blame are complicated, and their representations of their experiences indicate that they have high expectations for their own agency and action, without which they cannot be relieved of blameworthy feelings. This is a rape myth. Both Linda and Leslie begin to debunk this myth by directly stating to vlog viewers that if they have experienced sexual violence then they are not at fault. The #MeToo movement, therefore, helps survivors learn how to define and contextualize

their own experiences of sexual violence (Daigle, 2021). Accessing #MeToo online and reading other survivor's stories have helped Linda and Leslie to identify rape myths and resist them, while advocating for other survivors to do the same. However, this clarity of thinking is mixed with continuing feelings of self-blame that are commonly reported by survivors of sexual violence (Ahrens, 2006).

Some vloggers speak of their assaults as "embarrassing." Leslie recalls her first experience smoking marijuana at 14 years old with a friend and his cousin. She then links her embarrassment to the repression of the following memory. While watching a movie together, her assailant slipped his hands under the communal blanket and into her shorts. She recalls that, "I was so stoned and so shocked that I didn't know what to do. I literally just sat there and let it happen. And I think I didn't tell anyone at all because I was just so embarrassed because I felt like I was at an age that I could have been able to stand up for myself ... but I didn't. And I feel like a lot of these situations I need [to] stop blaming myself for being so weak" (Leslie, 2020, 11:06). Leslie's repression of the memory due to its embarrassing nature exemplifies how feelings of guilt and self-blame can silence survivors. Her presumed ability to thwart her assailant as a young teenager left her ashamed for not actually being able to prevent the assault, which lead to the incident being repressed in her memory. She did not share this experience with anyone until she created this vlog, something she attributes to the combination of embarrassment and repression she experienced. While she acknowledges that overcoming feelings of guilt and self-blame take time, Leslie recognizes her innocence – something she attributes to therapy and #MeToo. She also advocates for the importance of mental health, particularly in Asian-American households, and hopes to inspire more survivors to break their silences and alleviate feelings of guilt and self-blame.

Survivors' feelings of guilt and self-blame are reportedly exacerbated by negative social reactions to disclosure (Jacques-Tiura, Tkatch, Abbey, & Wegner, 2010). After Kate's friend blamed her assault on her drinking, "I felt like I did deserve it because you over there, you taking shots, like what did you think was gonna happen" (Kate, 2019, 28:06). Kate's feelings of self-blame silenced her even though she was not drunk – her assailants had drugged her drink. She assumed responsibility for being assaulted because of her intoxication for many years, even though it was coerced. With the help of her sister's support and online resources, Kate was able to articulate what happened to her and break her silence. She acknowledges that her feelings of guilt and self-blame are unfounded and is working on improving her mental health.

Rachel revisits her experience at her first high school party. After having had too much to drink, she was put to bed in the host's bedroom. She woke up with her assailant on top of her. Gossip about the incident spread quickly around her high school. Rachel says that, "I was just so embarrassed because it's like oh my god. And like the way, the dirty way that I lost my virginity, like it was in everybody's mouth" (Rachel, 2019, 13:38). The harassment at school and feelings of self-blame and shame led Rachel to drop out. She claims she has moved past these feelings of responsibility in recent years, but it took a long time to stop blaming herself. Rachel recalls that, "I blamed myself for allowing it. I blamed myself for going and for drinking and for smoking. For even laying down. And for going to sleep" (Rachel, 2019, 22:40). This self-blame led her to remain silent about her experience for years. After reading #MeToo stories being posted online on Facebook, Rachel was inspired to break her silence and film a vlog for YouTube to take back the narrative of her story.

When Britney was assaulted by her boyfriend of two years, she blamed herself for inaction. She says of the experience:

I was crying, shaking, and in a situation like that you just think like why don't you just

push him off? Why don't you scream, why don't you shout, why don't you kick him? And

it's like until you're in a situation like that, where you're with someone that you trusted for

two years, that has never done anything like that before, never done anything that would

hurt you or … make you feel any differently. And until you're paralyzed with like fear and

shock, you don't understand that you can't … you know like I was doing as much as I

could by saying like stop, or crying, and why are you doing this. (Britney, 2020, 04:46)

Britney emphasizes that her moments of resistance, however small they may appear to an outside

party, were all that she was capable of in the moment. In her vlog, Britney emphasizes her

resistance in the form of the non-verbal 'No's that she was capable of giving.

Heidi also focuses on the different ways she said 'No' without saying 'No'. She describes

trying to get her assailant to stop, saying, "'Listen, my friend likes you. This isn't cool.' And he's

like: 'I don't care, I don't like her.' And I'm like: 'Okay, I also, like I didn't shave today.' And

he's like: 'I don't care.' And I remember just listing all these reasons that I'm … I'm listing all

these like 'No's. But I never verbally said no" (Heidi, 2020, 12:40). Heidi's lack of consent is a

focus in her vlog; because she did not verbally say "No", she had difficulty both recognizing that

she was not at fault and coming to terms with her assault being non-consensual. After her friend's

negative social reaction that denied her lack of consent, Heidi spent years coming to terms with

what had happened to her. She had difficulty believing that this experience qualified as sexual

violence until she was able to access resources about rape apologists on Instagram that became

available post-#MeToo.

When revisiting the experience in her vlog, Heidi recounts her thought process at the time:

"And I think that's what stuck with me was, yeah, can't get him in trouble. 'Cause it's something

serious and that's too serious when I didn't technically say no, as well as I didn't technically say yes, so, whatever" (Heidi, 2020, 19:57). The technicality of saying 'yes' or 'no' reduces the concept of consent to a dichotomy; consent is either present with a "yes" or absent with a "no". Heidi fixates on this concept and discusses how long it took for her to recognize her assault as an assault.

In retrospect, she wishes she had shared her story more widely and pursued her assailant. Her friend's dismissal led Heidi to believe that because she was not able to say 'no', she therefore must have consented. She now has the terminology and knowledge to define and articulate her experience: "I just hope that by sharing my story and letting you guys know that rape doesn't have to happen with you kicking and screaming or completely unconscious, it's just you not saying 'yes'" (Heidi, 2020, 21:26).

Internalizing rape myths has negative consequences for survivors' mental health, including exacerbating symptoms of PTSD and depression (Moor, 2007; Riggs, 2021). In addition to the physical dimensions, fully attending to the trauma caused by sexual violence requires attending to and treating all aspects of the individual (Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2014; Riggs, 2021). I move on to discuss in more detail the emotional and psychological trauma of experiencing sexual violence and the associated barriers to silence breaking.

Emotional and Psychological Trauma

Research demonstrates that sexual violence is associated with greater risk for survivors of substance use and dependency, PTSD, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation in survivors (Burnam et al., 1988; Ullman et al, 2005). Further, negative social reactions to disclosures of sexual violence can adversely impact survivor health and wellbeing and increase the severity of mental

illness symptoms (Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2014; Riggs, 2021). The #MeToo movement's website prioritizes healing with a focus on helping survivors navigate such traumas. Specific resources and healing toolkits on metoomvmt.org pertain to PTSD, trauma, and triggers to help survivors gain the knowledge to articulate their own experiences. Overcoming trauma begins with identifying it, and the #MeToo site hopes survivors can "learn the shared language that connects this movement to others" (#MeToo, 2020, para. 4). The vloggers in my sample discuss their experiences with mental health in relation to sexual violence and #MeToo. The types of emotional and psychological trauma that they identify include PTSD symptoms, substance use, and suicidal ideation.

The long-term repercussions of sexual violence for survivors often manifests in symptoms of PTSD. In an interview study with survivors, Ahrens, Stansell, & Jennings (2010) found greater symptomatic presentation of depression and PTSD in survivors who did not disclose their violent experiences and those who received negative social reactions. Positive social reactions were associated with fewer and less severe impacts on survivors' mental health. Therefore, they suggest that the detrimental effects of either response on survivor's mental health complicates women's decision to break the silence, because positive social reactions cannot be guaranteed. Many survivors in my sample of #MeToo vloggers describe some form of personal experience with PTSD or PTSD symptoms. They demonstrate that PTSD is complex and the symptoms can manifest in many ways.

The dominant understanding of PTSD as a mental illness resulting from trauma was developed in 1980, when the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III)* was published[2]. The DSM-III indicates that anyone can develop this mental disorder after experiencing trauma, which was a novel intervention at a time when mental illness

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[2] The current edition is DSM-5 which was published in 2013 (Horwitz, 2018).

was still predominately considered to have its roots in pre-existing psychological and biological vulnerabilities (Horwitz, 2018). Consequently, the relationship between trauma exposure, stress-related conditions like sexual violence, and the development of PTSD has become well established (Horwitz, 2018).

Symptoms of PTSD are varied and present differently for each individual but generally include a person experiencing involuntary disturbing thoughts, flashbacks, fear, nightmares, and the impulse to self-isolate following a traumatic event (Horwitz, 2018; Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2014). Memories can also be repressed as a trauma response (Horwitz, 2018), as was experienced by Leslie, who for some time forgot her assault by her friend's cousin. Reminders of the traumatic experience can trigger PTSD symptoms, so they are often avoided through social isolation. After being assaulted by her boyfriend of two years in her bedroom, Britney could no longer sleep there due to the intense flashbacks she would experience: "I was sleeping in my car because I didn't wanna be in my bedroom. I would go to work, work 12 hours shifts and sleep in my car because I couldn't sleep in my room where he'd raped me because my house didn't feel safe anymore" (Britney, 2020, 10:59). Britney's debilitating symptoms of PTSD continued for nearly a year, despite having her mother as a consistent advocate and support.

Britney also discusses losing interest in horse-back riding, her lifelong hobby and passion. She cared for two horses at the time: George and Aragorn. While competing in dressage with Aragorn, her mother received word that Britney's assailant was resisting arrest for her assault. She affixed her feelings of terror and despair in that moment to Aragorn:

> Two years I couldn't sit on that horse without violently shaking or throwing up or having
>
> like PTSD symptoms and it was so ridiculously hard to explain to people because you
>
> sound crazy, don't you, for saying something like that. Like I wish in a way I had fallen

off [Aragorn] because it would be easier to say to someone like I've lost all my confidence

in riding because I fell off, not I lost my confidence because I was raped and then with my

PTSD I attached it to him. (Britney, 2020, 23:53)

Britney describes the difficulty of coping with PTSD and regaining her confidence about

horseback riding. She claims that it took her a long time to stop avoiding places out of fear her

assailant might be present.

Trauma from experiencing sexual violence reshapes almost every aspect of survivors'

lives, including new interpersonal relationships (O'Callaghan, Shepp, Ullman, & Kirkner, 2019).

Linda now has a deep-seated distrust of men: "And I know not every guy's gonna hurt me, but I'm

so scared that you will hurt me. Like I cannot be alone with a guy without fearing that he might

hurt me. I cannot walk alone because I'm so afraid that someone's gonna hurt me. I cannot be

alone in my house because I'm so afraid that someone's going to hurt me. I'm so scared" (Linda,

2020, 15:55). This distrust extends to men who she loves and cares for: "I don't feel safe, you

know? …I'm so afraid like people who I care about are gonna do things to me 'cause a lot of the

people that did things to me I cared about" (Linda, 2020, 19:29). When trusted relationships are

violated by sexual violence, the experience is traumatic (Haskell & Randall, 2019).

Some survivors cope in the aftermath of trauma by self-medicating (Ullman, Filipas,

Townsend, & Starzynski, 2005). Drugs and alcohol offer an escape from reality. Jillian describes

being afraid of falling asleep after being assaulted by a friend in a shared hotel room while on

vacation. Falling asleep would mean dreaming and potentially re-living her assault. She says that,

"I started taking Adderall so that I wouldn't fall asleep because falling asleep would mean…my

brain starts to form what it thinks happened and trying to put the pieces together" (Jillian, 2020,

11:43). She describes falling into a deep psychosis after days of sleep deprivation.

Makayla also turned to drugs and alcohol after being assaulted while sleeping on her friend's couch. She woke up to the flash of a camera as her assailant took intimate pictures of her. After reporting her assault to police, she reveals she "was dead inside. It was one pill after another and one shot after another" (Makayla, 2019, 6:57). Dependence on substances is a maladaptive coping mechanisms survivors frequently identify in the aftermath of trauma (Ullman et al., 2005).

Kate describes her dependent relationship on alcohol and sleeping pills in the years following her assault. She describes the moment she realized she was endangering not only her own life, but that of her infant daughter:

> …this year was hard as well, because not only did I pick up my drinking again, not only did I pick up smoking again, but also … I started with pills. And it's not even the pills you would think. I really started taking Benadryl pills. I remember like in November, I remember taking 6 pills at a time. I remember taking 6 pills at once. Just, I had a rough day and I remember taking 6 pills, just wanting to go to sleep. And that's how I knew I really wasn't over it. I really wasn't over it. And that really scared me, because I'm like… it was too easy for me to just take those 6 pills and go lay down like I don't have my whole child in the other room that's depending on me. (Kate, 2019, 37:55)

Kate reflects further on the experience of violence she could not quite repress: "I can't drink it away. I can't smoke it away. I can't take pills to take the edge off. I can't sex it away. I can't do all that. I can't just ignore it…I wanna be here for [my daughter], and I'm like that's not gonna happen if I can sit there and take 6 pills like it's nothing" (Kate, 2019, 40:07). She recognizes warning signs that she may not be able to control her behavior should these destructive habits continue and hopes that posting her vlog will constitute a first step towards seeking professional help. Kate says that this vlog is "holding me accountable to keep living for my daughter" (Kate,

2019, 44:31). #MeToo provided her with the space and virtual opportunity to share her story and hold herself accountable to live on.

In the aftermath of experiencing sexual violence, vloggers reference suicidal ideation. Alyssa "just wanted to die. I literally just wanted to die at this point. I was miserable" (Alyssa, 2019, 13:47). Sydney also "had suicidal thoughts" (Sydney, 2020, 13:13). Kate discloses that "I don't even know how I made it through that month, that year, period" (Kate, 2019, 30:06). Makayla speaks to her assailant, "You made me want to die" (Makayla, 2019, 7:09), a sentiment that led her to be hospitalized after an attempted drug overdose.

Britney discusses her own suicide attempts: "So after I first reported it… two times I ended up in hospital because I'd taken an overdose because I couldn't live with this pain anymore. […] It was like a combo of being raped by someone that I trusted, having to deal with the police, and 2 of my best friends at the time" (Britney, 2020, 19:19). The pain of living with being assaulted compounded with her treatment by friends and police caused Britney to attempt suicide twice. She details her abusive treatment by police in her vlog, as well as her more general negative experiences within the criminal justice system.

Barriers to Justice

Interactions with law enforcement constitute another silencing mechanism for survivors who do seek justice through the penal system. Speaking generally of her experience with law enforcement in the United Kingdom, Britney "…felt like I was just fighting everything and everyone and it was exhausting. I've never been so physically, emotionally, mentally drained in my life because I just felt everyday was a fight and I shouldn't be fighting the people that are supposed to be helping me" (Britney, 2020, 24:57). This experience is not uncommon; of all the survivors in my sample

who interacted with police, not one reported having had a single positive experience. Britney, for example, describes her long battle with police: "This is the bit that upsets me more than anything. I can talk about a lot of things, but I think the ways that I felt when I was going through this whole reporting side of it… that was worse than being raped. The way that I was thought of, treated, spoken to by the police and my SOIT officer" (Britney, 2020, 12:35). In terms of her terrible treatment by law enforcement, she reports being questioned by the police about what panties she wore at the time of her assault, officers attempting to isolate her from her mother for invasive questioning, and police confiscating her phone for nearly a year – while her assailant's phone was returned long before.

The worst example of Britney's poor treatment by law enforcement came in the form of an email: "I remember opening her email after I had sent her the texts from [my assailant] saying like: 'I'm sorry. I didn't know what I was doing.' She said to me: 'At least he said he was sorry, which is more than most get'" (Britney, 2020, 14:02). The email proceeded to minimize and normalize Britney's assault, suggesting that she could overcome her PTSD by rearranging her room. Britney further recounts that after she first reported her assault to police, she was informed that victim services would be in touch. At the time she posted her vlog, five years later, she reports that they still have not contacted her. She stresses that the process is designed to exhaust you and would not advise a survivor to come forward unless they have a strong support system in place. Raising a formal complaint about sexual violence is difficult, and the success rate is low (Daly & Bouhours, 2010).

In her blog *Feministkilljoy,* Sarah Ahmed develops the concept of 'strategic inefficiency', which helps to make sense of the difficulty women face when registering formal complaints with authorities. She (2018) enumerates deliberate tactics taken by institutions to stop the complaint

process before action is necessary, such as prolonged institutional response and incomplete informal record-keeping of event details. Ahmed suggests "that inefficiency is beneficial insofar as it supports an already existing hierarchy" (2018, para. 25), by which she means that the complaint system is ineffective by design. The end goal is case burn out – with the complaint being dropped by the survivor or otherwise dismissed. Strategic inefficiency is discussed by women vloggers in relation to their experiences interacting with law enforcement.

Without a support system or advocate, the process of raising a formal complaint can be incredibly frustrating (Daly & Bouhours, 2010). Despite being silenced by and subsequently losing her friends, Tina reported her assaults to the police, which was a disappointing experience:

…they've arrested [Assailant two] but he has been let go on bail. And… detectives don't even know [Assailant one's] name… I've told them, he's told me his nickname. I told 'em what room I thought he was in, I told 'em he's in a frat. It's so easy for them to get a roster, it's so easy for them to, you know, like investigate this. But, you know, by now, like that frat knows what happened to me. I'm sure those sheets are washed. I'm sure everything has been, you know, cleaned up. And, you know, it's been a month and detectives still don't even know his name so obviously that shows how much attention they're putting into this. (Tina, 2020, 13:35)

Her disheartening experience with police was the catalyst for filming her vlog. Throughout her video, Tina lists statistics that helped her understand the pervasive problem of sexual violence and inspire her fight for justice. Tina hopes that sharing her experience will help spread awareness of the pervasive problem of sexual violence and silencing at universities, particularly within Greek-letter organizations, so that "all predators [will] know that it is not okay and that we are gonna start speaking up and you guys are gonna stop getting away with it" (Tina, 2020, 17:47). She also hopes

to gain more support – and subsequent police attention – for her open case. The grueling and exhaustive process of seeking legal justice as a survivor is echoed by many other women in my sample.

Alyssa was living with her army-employed husband on the US's Guam military base when she met her assailant. They began a consensual affair that ended in a non-consensual and violent altercation. After being brutally assaulted, she called her husband from her assailant's driveway and he insisted on driving her to the hospital. She describes a seven-hour intense period of pictures, tests, and questioning which "…was invasive and I was scared and then the investigators came in while I was in my hospital gown. And they're asking me all these questions and I just didn't wanna answer any of 'em. I was freaked out. And I just- it was numb. I was just numb" (Alyssa, 2019, 12:09). She then describes having to repeat the entire process the next day at the police station.

The process of intense questioning, sampling, and collecting was also experienced by Makayla after she decided to pursue charges against her assailant. She describes a two-and-a-half-year battle with the judicial system before her assailant finally plead guilty. Fortunately, Makayla's assailant accidentally captured his conspicuous watch in some of the non-consensual pictures of her assault found on his phone. It was only after her assailant wore the watch to court that he finally admitted to committing the assault and pled guilty.

Jillian remembers being afraid of reporting her assault to police. Prior to it, she had been drinking and ingesting cocaine and molly. After saving her underwear for weeks, she finally gathered the courage to call the police hotline and instigate the complaint process. However, "…the detective called me with the great news of: 'We don't have enough evidence, I'm sorry. Glad you reported it though. 'Cause the next time it happens, hopefully something will be done about it.' That's exactly why I didn't wanna report it" (Jillian, 2020, 18:36). Jillian elaborates: "This is also

why a lot of victims don't speak out because nothing is done for them. I didn't even get to go to trial. He didn't even get fucking questioned" (Jillian, 2020, 22:43). Fear of breaking the silence around sexual violence in search of justice, only to experience strategic inaction, is reported by many survivors as a purposeful deterrent to interacting with the police (Decker et al., 2019). This fear is rational, as the percentage of sexually violent cases that proceed to court is low (Tasca, Rodriguez, Spohn, & Koss, 2013).

The treatment of assault survivors in a penal case is described by them as deliberately exhausting, which is accomplished through strategic inefficiencies. The main objective of this strategy is persuading the complainant to drop the case, preventing the complaint from being fully investigated. In the justice system, this phenomenon is referred to as attrition, and the rate of attrition for a crime refers to the gap between reported cases and investigated cases (Daly & Bouhours, 2010). Daly and Bouhours (2010) describe attrition in sexual violence cases as being the greatest at the beginning of the process; on average only 14% of survivors will report their victimization to police.

There are many points of attrition identified in sexual violence cases. As police are often the first contact a survivor has with the justice system, their initial decisions determine which cases will reach prosecutors (Tasca et al., 2013). Evidentiary strength, perceived crime seriousness, and victim believability factor into police decision-making as they determine which cases to actively pursue. The women vloggers in my sample provide further examples of police decision-making in action.

Sydney describes her feelings that accompanied the inaction of police authorities when she found out that nothing would be done to her assailant. Because the assault was not investigated, she fears that it appears fabricated: "My biggest fear was for everybody to know, which they did,

they found out about everything. And then not only did they push me away and guilt me for doing it, now I'm this person that I dunno, lied. And it's just this joke to people. And it sucks. Like for them to sit there and do nothing" (Sydney, 2020, 7:05). When the criminal justice system denies their complaints and frustrates the complaint process, survivors are further silenced.

After Alyssa was brutally assaulted, her husband drove her to the hospital on the Guam military base. There, she was intensively questioned and examined as the detectives began their investigation. With every phone call and update about her case, she found it increasingly difficult to move past the trauma. Even after moving off base and seeing a therapist, Alyssa says it ultimately was just too hard on her. She describes calling her lawyer to discuss dropping the case:

> I told my lawyer, I was like: 'I don't think I can do this. Emotionally. I'm trying to get into a good space. I'm trying to … be okay, again, you know? And I don't know what I absolutely want to do.' […] So, my case is dropped completely. And the next day, after the case is finalized [my assailant] didn't have any punishments or anything. I regretted it so heavily, and it's been weighing on me since then. (Alyssa, 2019, 15:11)

Alyssa regrets her decision yet recognizes that the cost of justice could not include her compromised mental health.[3]

Britney emphasizes how grueling the judicial process is: "It's not something you can do on your own. You can't fight your own fight, fight the system, fight the police, fight the CPS, all on your own. It's absolutely exhausting" (Britney, 2020, 28:34). She describes her ensuing battle with

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[3] Six months after posting her initial video, Alyssa posted an update. Her case was reopened and for fear of acquittal she accepted a plea deal. Her assailant has been discharged from the military with no other punishment. There have been no subsequent updates as of August 15th, 2021 (Alyssa, 2020).

the judicial system as arduous and "worse than being raped" (Britney, 2020, 12:44). The battle took nearly two years, and her active involvement was required at each step along the way.

The toll of reporting her sexual assault on her mental health was the motivating factor behind Britney's vlog post, as she hoped to inform other survivors of hidden challenges involved in seeking justice. Participating in #MeToo provided her with the virtual opportunity to articulate her experience, educate other survivors, and raise awareness of the reality of lodging a formal complaint with the criminal justice system. Britney argues that "…a common misconception people have, is that when they report it that it's pretty much good as done. It's not at all. It's down to the CPS and myself. How could you prove someone raped you? Because at the end of the day, it's gonna be one word against another" (Britney, 2020, 28:46). Britney wants all survivors to be aware of the slim likelihood that their assailants will receive a guilty verdict in court. She spent two years fighting only for her case to be dropped due to lack of evidence. She cautions all survivors to prepare for this outcome, as it is unfortunately the most common (Daly & Bouhours, 2010; Morabito, Williams, & Pattavina, 2019).

Conclusion

Women vloggers articulate not only how they have been silenced, but the negative outcomes they have experienced from these acts of silencing. Vlogs posted under #MeToo offer women the digital space to identify and describe the silencing mechanisms that shaped their experiences of sexual violence. Articulating these mechanisms therefore breaks vlogger's silences and helps other survivors identify these dynamics in their own experiences. This iterative process contributes to #MeToo's goal of resisting the silencing mechanisms that structure sexual violence.

In this chapter, I described and analyzed the mechanisms that women vloggers identify as barriers to silence breaking. By detailing their experiences, these women describe how they were silenced through social reactions, internalized rape myths, emotional and psychological trauma, and barriers to justice. In the next chapter, I address other ways in which women vloggers engage with and think about the #MeToo movement. The benefits and drawbacks to participation that the women identify are discussed, as well as how they imagine other survivors may be affected by their vlogs.

Chapter Five: Representing #MeToo

The #MeToo movement is more than just isolated moments of social interaction on the internet. Rather, it has developed into a digital feminist social movement that seeks to dismantle sexual violence by empowering survivors through empathy (Burke, 2021), which involves breaking the collective silence and resisting other mechanisms that structure sexual violence. In the previous chapter, I focused on understanding how women represent their experiences of sexual violence and silencing, and their engagement with the #MeToo movement as a form of digital feminist activism. The vlog representations of #MeToo signify it as a significant vehicle through which they identify and resist structures of sexual violence.

In this chapter, I build on this discussion by exploring, from the perspective of vloggers, the affordances and drawbacks of participating in #MeToo and of the goals of the movement. In the first section, I describe how vloggers represent these goals and their understandings of #MeToo as a mechanism of silence-breaking related to voice, resistance, and survivor solidarity that positively affects other survivors of sexual violence. In the second section, I explore the drawbacks to participation identified by vloggers, including the emotional burden of disclosure, continued need to combat rape myths, and likelihood of perpetrator denial of guilt.

Representations of #MeToo's Goals

The long-term goals of the #MeToo movement are outlined on the main #MeToo website, under the 'Vision and Theory of Change' subsection. Its mission is delineated as follows:

> 'Me too' serves as a convener, innovator, thought leader, and organizer across the mainstream and the grassroots to address systems that allow for the proliferation of sexual violence, specifically in Black, queer, trans, disabled, and all communities of color. Leveraging its model and framework, grounded in existing research and theory, 'me too'

centers individual and community healing and transformation, empowerment through

empathy, shifting cultural narratives and practices and advancing a global survivor-led

movement to end sexual violence. (MeToo movement, 2021b, para 5)

#MeToo envisions a world free of sexual violence and it seeks to achieve this vision by

emphasizing individual survivor healing and community intervention, which involves shifting

dominant social narratives about sexual violence through critical conversations about it. On an

individual level, these goals can be understood as breaking the silence, resisting structures of

sexual violence in society, and empowering other survivors through empathy.

Breaking the silence involves participating in #MeToo by saying 'me too' and voicing an

experience of sexual violence, whether publicly in the form of a social media post or privately to

a trusted party. Resisting the structures of sexual violence in society entails resisting pervasive

attitudes about sexual violence that are often structured by rape myths. Education is critical to this

goal; survivors must have the knowledge to identify and resist these structures. The organizers of

#MeToo prioritize empowerment through empathy by building a community network of survivors

who have empowered each other to break their silences, believing "in the radical possibilities of a

movement against sexual violence, led by survivors of sexual violence" (Me Too movement,

2021b, para. 1). In this subsection, I demonstrate how each of these three goals are being achieved

by #MeToo, as exemplified through the vloggers representations of their experiences.

Voice

The wide reach of the internet and access to various social media websites allowed each of my

participants to find #MeToo, connect with the movement, and voice their own experiences of

sexual violence. In many respects, the vloggers embody the goals of #MeToo: all express hope

that any survivors watching will be empowered to share their own experiences, just as they were.

As Suk et al. (2021) describe, "When considering women's experiences of sexual violence and harassment and the value of testimony and witnessing in the public sphere, social media forums have become focal sites of exchange and acknowledgment" (p. 279). They (2021) stress that, while the movement was aided by Tarana Burke's grassroots activism and Alyssa Milano's popularity, #MeToo became formidable because of its reliance on interpersonal communication among survivors – fostered through a variety of social media forums and websites.

Vloggers describe the impact of different social media on their personal healing journeys. Rachel saw #MeToo trending on social media and felt empowered by the stories she read:

> So recently, like several months ago, I started seeing the #MeToo movement stories being posted online on Facebook. And everybody coming out and being strong enough to tell their story and what they experienced. Whether it was 10 years ago, 2 years ago, last month. And I found that to be so beautiful, in a way. To have all these people come out with it and to talk about it so others can heal. (Rachel, 2019, 32:04)

Reading stories from other survivors on Facebook and watching their videos on YouTube inspired Rachel to add her voice to #MeToo.

For Star, the online forum Reddit introduced her to the movement. Britney and Heidi describe the impact of Instagram on their personal healing journeys. After accessing the digital feminist social movement through the hashtag across these social media platforms, millions of survivors continue to break their individual silences about experiencing sexual violence. Every disclosure presents a new opportunity to break the silence. #MeToo empowers survivors to raise their voices – which can have many different meanings.

Predicated on Western liberal humanist assumptions, the notion of political voice frequently signals both subjectivity and the capacity to affect political change (Corman, 2016).

Being voiceless, in accordance with this metaphor, is to be an object or to be objectified. However, the dynamics of political voice, as dialogical and relational, suggest that the achievement of political voice is made possible in the context of reception (Corman, 2016). Summarizing the feminist voice and representation debates, Corman notes,

> Perhaps we might understand voice as the ability to define and assert one's subjectivity, or the power to have one's subjectivity recognized by those who refuse it. According to some, it is simply not enough to speak one's experience because the speaking itself does not guarantee truly being heard. Language and speech also become metaphors for agency and resistance. As such, only those privileged enough to actually be heard can effect change, because they are able to speak a language that is heard. (2012, pp. 195-196)

Experiential knowledge is also often emphasized through the voice metaphor (Corman, 2016). Thus, "voice" in its political register, particularly within Western feminist articulations, implies subjectivity, resistance, and valuation of experiential knowledge. The #MeToo movement invokes the voice metaphor through its sustained focus on silence-breaking and resistance. However, by sustaining this focus, the digital social movement may fail to represent survivors who practice silence (Gómez & Gobin, 2019; van Rijswijk, 2020).

The #MeToo movement's website prompts survivors who are considering breaking their silence to read the PCAR's resource "*Speaking Out from within: Speaking Publicly about Sexual Assault*" which delineate the benefits of disclosure "Telling can be transformative. It can help you move through the shame and secrecy that keeps you isolated. It can open doors to understanding and support. Telling is one way you can become a model for other survivors. It can be empowering to speak out against someone else's crime. Speaking out can lift the burden of silence. Speaking out publicly is not right for everyone" (2020, p. 2). This last sentence addresses survivors who

want or need to remain silence. The document stresses that, "No one should be pressured to tell their story. Survivors are heroes whether they speak out or not. Speaking out can mean many things – it can mean putting your story on paper for yourself in a journal entry, telling one trusted person, speaking at a national conference of advocates, or testifying on legislation at your state's legislature, for example" (2020, p. 2). By listing these means of voicing, survivors who are not in a position to publicly articulate their experiences of sexual violence are explicitly included in the movement.

Voice as resistance to silence must also be understood intersectionally, because breaking the silence does not carry the same meaning for all survivors of sexual violence. Research suggests that marginalized voices are still under-represented in the #MeToo movement and mainstream discussions of it, which complicates marginalized survivors' ability to identify as survivors (Palmer, Fissel, Hoxmeier, & Williams, 2021). As Parpart and Parashar (2019) suggest, marginalized voices are often neglected in favor of privileged voices, as voice is not equally available to all women in society.

The #MeToo movement's website is careful to note that participation does not look the same for every survivor, which implicitly acknowledges the oppression of racialized and marginalized voices and the ability to declare 'me too' (Me Too movement, 2021b). It thus frames education about sexual violence as critical so survivors can understand and articulate their experiences, and identify as credible survivors. Resources compiled on the website serve as educational tools, while also providing "the shared language that connects this movement to others" (Me Too movement, 2021c, para. 3).

Rachel gained the knowledge to define her experience after reading #MeToo posts online. When she was assaulted over 10 years ago, gossip began circulating around her high school and

her classmates started asking directly if she had been raped. She lacked the words to define her experience and did not know how to reply, asking her older sister for advice: "If someone is passed out and somebody has sex with them, is that rape?" (Rachel, 2019, 15:55) When her sister expressed concern over her question, Rachel dissimulated:

> 'I was just curious, you know. Or do you have to say like 'no' for it to be rape? Like, do you have to be like, no get off.' Cause I just like had the impression that, like, rape was like a guy trying to have sex with a girl, and her being like 'No!' and fighting him off and pushing him off. And so my sister basically was like: 'It's definitely sexual assault.' And I was like 'Oh, okay.' (Rachel, 2019, 16:18)

Despite her sister's insistence that the experience qualified as sexual assault, Rachel believed for years that the specific circumstances of her assault disqualified her from being a survivor.

Over time Rachel learned how to define what happened to her and use her voice – something she attributes to having read #MeToo online posts, but also to television portrayals of sexual violence like the Netflix show *13 Reasons Why*. Rachel explains: "It's such a common thing to show, that kind of party sex scene. And I am so grateful, honestly, that they're showing that and they're drawing attention to it. That like unconscious, at a party ... having somebody coming in to have sex with you, that is rape. At the end of the day, that's rape. You didn't consent to it. You weren't awake for it" (Rachel, 2019, 29:05). Watching a similar experience represented on television recontextualized her assault. Rachel describes a shift in her perception as she began to dismantle the rape myths she encountered and re-define what sexual violence was. #MeToo demonstrated the prevalence and dynamics of sexual violence to Rachel, which she could then 'apply' to other media representations of it. And realizing how common violence is helped her to heal.

Rachel wishes she had stuck up for herself in the aftermath of her assault; lacking the words to define her experience led to her silence: "And I was just such a quiet person during that time. But, I'm not gonna be quiet about this, because this is real. This is my story. This is what happened. This is so common" (Rachel, 2019, 35:39). She hopes that any survivor watching her vlog will be empowered in the same way that *13 Reasons Why* and #MeToo empowered her. Rachel's participation in the movement is exemplary of #MeToo's goals of silence-breaking and education. As she learned to use her voice and break the silence about her own experience of sexual violence, her growing connection to the movement allowed her to, in turn, use her experience to help educate other survivors and potentially empower them to break their silences.

Reflecting on the sexual violence she survived as a child and young adult, Leslie explains that "I'm just happy that I'm able to stand up for myself and to say what's on my mind now. To speak up. To finally know how to use my voice" (Leslie, 2020, 20:31). She describes the impact of the movement, her psychologist, and her pastor on her personal healing journey. Coming to terms with her experiences of sexual violence was difficult, she says: "I feel like when I kept it to myself the longest time was because I blamed myself and not a lot of people like to talk about their flaws" (Leslie, 2020, 21:20). Resisting blame and navigating rape myths is difficult, but Leslie hopes that with time every survivor will feel safe enough to raise their voice and share their story, encouraging her viewers to seek healthy and constructive paths to healing. Not all paths to healing require public voicings, like writing in a journal or telling one trusted friend (PCAR, 2020). Both private and public vocal acts resist the silence that structures sexual violence, allowing for solidarity with #MeToo without necessitating public disclosure.

Resistance

Tina describes breaking her silence and raising her voice as an act of resistance. After losing her sorority sisters and friends, dropping out of university, and experiencing strategic inefficiency

when reporting her assaults to the police, she believes she has nothing left to lose: "I'm speaking out. And I'm also speaking out for all those girls that have not said anything – and it's not just girls, men too. For all those survivors that have not said anything and that are scared to, and it's hard to speak out, but you know at this point… nothing's holding me back from not saying anything" (Tina, 2020, 14:38). She acknowledges that for many viewers the decision to break the silence is complex, and her choice was mitigated by her loss. Tina is "not OK with it and I'm gonna stand up for what I believe in and for my rights. […] I just want to be heard" (Tina, 2020, 17:00). Posting her vlog on YouTube is an act of resistance against the structures that silenced her and other survivors.

Resisting these structures often also involves survivors becoming their own advocates. After the police did not investigate her assault when she lodged a complaint, Jillian fell into silence: "at the time, I didn't care to get my truth out. I just wanted it to go away" (Jillian, 2020, 21:39). But later she realized that voicing her experience of sexual violence out loud and acknowledging it was necessary for her to heal, because it is a trauma that drugs and alcohol cannot resolve. She explains that, "This is me in the rawest form and my voice needs to be heard. There was nothing done about my situation and it's not my word versus his at all, in this case, which it looks like from the outside point of view, but … it's my story" (Jillian, 2020, 2:08). For Jillian, sharing her story publicly and being heard beyond the confines of her friend group is the biggest benefit to posting her vlog.

Like Tina and Jillian, Alyssa also posted her vlog as active resistance. After her long and scrutinous experience with the police following her brutal assault, Alyssa found herself re-living the trauma every time the phone rang. She made the difficult decision to drop her case because she could not handle the level of active involvement required of her. However, she regrets that her

assailant has not been punished. Alyssa hopes that, "getting my story out there will maybe give me some sense of power again" (Alyssa, 2019, 17:18). Reclaiming the narrative of her story and telling it in a way that best suits her emotional needs is an important part of her healing journey. Although she stresses several times throughout her vlog that she is not seeking sympathy for her story, she also addresses the catharsis of sharing her story with the public.

The vloggers in my study distinguish empathy from sympathy quickly, making it clear that there is no room for sympathy in the #MeToo movement. As Thirioux, Mercier, Blanke, & Berthoz (2014) explain, "empathy – feeling into – is closely related to sympathy – feeling with" (p. 286). Sympathy refers to the process of trying to understand someone else's experience from one's own social perspective and location, when that experience is not shared (Thirioux et al., 2014). It is an attempt at intersubjectivity based on trying to 'imagine yourself in another person's shoes'. Empathy, by contrast, involves intersubjective understanding generated from actually having worn those shoes; from a shared experience that allows one to understand what the experience *means* to someone else, providing a shared vantage point on the experience (Thirioux et al., 2014). The #MeToo movement is based on this empathetic relationship between survivors: survivors empower survivors who empower survivors (Burke, 2021). Through survivor solidarity, vloggers embody these empathetic relationships.

Survivor Solidarity

The central tenet of the #MeToo movement, empowerment through empathy, is expressed in the vlogs through survivor solidarity. The women align themselves with other survivors, often verbally dedicating their vlogs to them, offering advice, support, and empathy. One of the most blatant ways the women in my study recognize how their experiential vlogs may affect other survivors of sexual violence is through the inclusion of trigger warnings. For example, Star begins her vlog

with this trigger warning: "If you are triggered by tales of abuse, sexual assault or molestation, especially towards children, please click off of this video" (Star, 2020, 00:04). Even in the vlogs where a trigger warning is not explicitly posted, all vloggers speak to how traumatic the subject matter is and encourage the viewer to leave when they feel uncomfortable. Knowledge of their own trauma informs the way the vloggers speak to their audience; they recognize the impacts of trauma and subsequently format their vlogs to cause the least harm. Two of the vlogs were even age-restricted by vloggers; they are only available to users who have signed into YouTube, confirmed their age is above 18, and thus are able to consent to viewing restricted material.

Heidi's vlog was posted with the goal of encouraging survivors to raise their voices. Before filming, she asked her subscribers if they would be interested in hearing her story as part of a collaborative project with a mental health foundation called *The Fragile Club*. Heidi "got a lot of responses saying that they think that this story of mine can affect a lot more than other stories that I would share, which is really sad, but I guess if my story and how I tried so hard to suppress it myself can help someone else, then that's what this is all about" (Heidi, 2020, 3:37). She describes initially being unable to define her assault, given that she did not explicitly say 'No'. Learning about sexual violence gave her the vocabulary to define her experience, and she now confidently educates her subscribers about consent. Heidi encourages any survivors watching to "Speak up. Speak your truth. Share with the people you love, and if you don't get the right answer the first time, don't accept that as the only opinion on your story, ok?" (Heidi, 2020, 21:50). Ultimately, survivor solidarity was the purpose of Heidi's vlog, generated through the shared identification of and resistance to rape myths that structured her experience of sexual violence.

Vloggers appreciate the community of support that #MeToo has created and encourage survivors to participate in it. Rachel feels empowered and supported by #MeToo. Seeing the vast

number of survivors add their voice to #MeToo helps her to realize that "although it's heartbreaking that they had to go through these experiences, we can overcome it, and it doesn't become us" (Rachel, 2019, 36:20). The comfort Rachel finds in knowing she is not alone in her experience is a comfort shared by several vloggers – and one they extend to viewers.

Survivors vocalize messages of hope and solidarity. Leslie "wants to share my experiences to let certain people out there know that you're not alone and hopefully something from my message can encourage you guys and maybe even make you guys a little stronger in your situation" (Leslie, 2020, 2:07). And, in the case of a negative reaction to disclosure, Leslie "[wants] you guys out there to know that you are strong and you don't need other people's words to validate your worth" (Leslie, 2020, 18:48). Jillian recommends that "If you've ever been raped, know that it is not your fault and there are people around you who love you" (Jillian, 2020, 23:12). Messages like these encourage survivors to resist the rape myths that underpin dominant social narratives about sexual violence and recognize their non-complicity, whether they feel strong and supported enough to break their silence and join #MeToo or not.

Empowerment through empathy is exemplified through vloggers' dialogues with viewers. They identify and resist the structures that have silenced them and encourage all other survivors be empowered to do the same. As Star describes, "The things that hurt the most are the things you need to learn to talk about. What I am doing now helped me and I'm hoping helps you" (Star, 2020, 7:50). She endorses disclosure as a healing method, suggesting that her mental health greatly improved after being able to voice her experiences of sexual violence as a child. Speaking about trauma can significantly improve survivor mental health (Riggs, 2021). This is a common theme in vloggers' advice to survivors, despite the emotional challenges associated with breaking the silence.

Britney gives her "honest advice to anyone going through this or that knows anyone going through this, is to please, please talk to someone that you trust and that you're not alone" (Britney, 2020, 29:39). She attributes her resilience to her mother's advocacy and her horses. She acknowledges the difficulty of healing even with such support: "I didn't know if I was still gonna be around, you know, this amount of time on, because for a while I didn't want to be? But now I wanna use my experience to try and help other people" (Britney, 2020, 33:19). Britney hopes to use her experience to empower and uplift other survivors.

Kate describes that she, like Britney, "made this video so I could maybe inspire somebody to come out as well. 'Cause I do feel better. I do feel good that I talked about it" (Kate, 2019, 43:50). After Kate broke her nearly 6-year silence about her experience of sexual violence, she describes feeling a weight lifted from her shoulders and considers posting the vlog and raising her voice to be a major milestone on her healing journey. She uses her experience to encourage all survivors to follow suit and release their burdens.

Heidi invites survivors to disclose in the comment section below her video. She advises that, "if you feel like you wanna share something for the first time or the fifth time or the hundredth time, then go ahead. You can leave a comment down below and maybe you can film your own story or even talk to your parents, talk to your friends, tell someone for the first time" (Heidi, 2020, 4:25). Heidi's comment thus serves as a microcosm of #MeToo by allowing survivors to post and respond to each other's disclosures with messages of solidarity and support.

This permission is also extended by Britney: "And I just hope that anyone that's watching this that has been through anything similar, just know that my inbox is always open" (Britney, 2020, 30:18). Makayla also suggests that any survivors who need to talk should feel free to "…reach out to me and my [Instagram] dms are always open, so please feel like you can message

me if you just need to rant or you just want someone to listen. I will always be there" (Makayla, 2019, 00:21). Linda encourages survivors who need someone to reach out to contact her: "Like bitch, I'll cry with you. Because damn, we all going through our own shit, you know?" (Linda, 2020, 33:14). She takes survivor solidarity very seriously and holds a club at her high school to educate and raise awareness about abuse and teen dating violence. The call to action she extends does not end with survivors. Linda encourages everyone to advocate for the survivors in their lives. She pleads for everyone to "Be an ally to these women, to these girls, to these boys, children, elderlies. […] For every victim, I'm so sorry. I'm like so sorry. You didn't deserve it." (Linda, 2020, 26:48). Linda understands the impact one person can have on a survivor's mental health and hopes that she can use her experience to help others heal.

The #MeToo movement's long-term goals of breaking the silence, resisting rape myths, and empowering survivors through empathy (Me Too movement, 2021b) are represented by the vloggers through their discussions of voice, resistance, and survivor solidarity. As they narrate their experiences of sexual violence, vloggers voice and resist the structures that silenced them, encouraging viewers to recognize and resist these structures in their own experiences. For many, the choice to post their vlog is mitigated by the potential to help other survivors. In this regard, the women understand #MeToo as a mechanism of silence-breaking that affects other survivors of sexual violence.

Vloggers emphasize that breaking the silence is a decision that should not be taken lightly. Preparing survivors for the reality of life after breaking the silence is critical, because although the #MeToo movement has been instrumental in helping survivors understand and articulate the structures that silenced them, those silencing structures still exist. Survivors caution viewers about

the drawbacks of participating in a public feminist movement, as there are still legitimate risks to saying 'me too.' I discuss the risks below.

Drawbacks to Participating

Despite the social affordances of the #MeToo movement, survivors of sexual violence still must learn to navigate life in a social context in which rape myths continue to be accepted. The vloggers in my sample identify several drawbacks to participating in #MeToo: survivors will bear emotional burdens of disclosure, combating rape myths is ceaseless and frustrating, and there is a slim likelihood that perpetrators will be found guilty. Breaking the silence about sexual violence and participating in #MeToo should be an informed choice, and the vloggers warn that navigating everyday life as a survivor is difficult.

Emotional Burden of Disclosure

While vloggers recommend disclosure as a necessary step towards healing, as I describe above, they simultaneously acknowledge the difficulties associated with disclosing. Kate thinks that when "You tell somebody 'I was raped.' That's heavy. For anybody to deal with. Especially when it's your friend or it's your family member" (Kate, 2019, 35:07). The aftermath of traumatic events can have a tremendous impact on survivors (Riggs, 2021). Repeatedly disclosing the experience is incredibly difficult because it requires survivors to continually reference their memory of the traumatic event, causing recurrent exposure through each discussion. As survivors describe, saying 'me too' is only the first step towards healing, and disclosure will continue to be necessary for the rest of a survivor's life as they navigate their relationships (Riggs, 2021).

When Britney was assaulted by her boyfriend, her two best friends were unwilling to support her. Britney explains that, "a week after I was raped, one of my best friend's just texted

me and said like, 'Oh how are you?' And I said like, 'I'm really struggling at the minute.' This was the week after I was raped. And she said to me that she's bored of hearing about it now, can I talk about something else?" (Britney, 2020, 20:11) Her friend's 'boredom' after a week of supporting Britney through her trauma lead her to realize the shallowness of their friendship. This response to her disclosure, shared without care for Britney's wellbeing, demonstrates the difficulty survivors face when deciding if or when to disclose.

A second of Britney's friends "said to me 'At least he was hot.' […] And, honestly, I think … could you imagine someone saying stuff like that about, I dunno like, your ex. Like that would hurt enough without it being about the man that raped you" (Britney, 2020, 20:34). The misguided belief that the sexual attractiveness of her assailant would somehow lessen Britney's trauma insulted her. Disclosing to her two best friends ultimately lead to the dissolution of their friendships. This loss, compounded by the trauma of her assault, lead her to attempt suicide twice because she felt utterly alone. Britney describes how her mom, her horse, and her charity group helped her navigate life after being assaulted.

Positive social reactions can unfortunately not be guaranteed. Some survivors choose not to disclose because of this uncertainty (Ahrens, 2006). Kate describes feeling permanently changed after she was assaulted. She stopped disclosing due to the negative social reactions she received and began to repress her experience. However, it affected her more than she let on: "and people would see me and feel like girl you have everything going for you. You in school, you finished school. You have a job. You have a child. You have family. You have friends. You have people that love you. But, I don't feel it" (Kate, 2019, 40:57). The disparity between others' perceptions of Kate and her own understanding of her lived experience caused her to feel depressed. While she continuously acknowledges the milestone of posting her story on YouTube, she also discusses how

breaking her silence has only accomplished so much, recognizing that there is a lifelong healing journey ahead of her.

While social media provide platforms for survivors to disclose their experiences of sexual violence (Bogen et al., 2021) and thus potentially shift social attitudes about sexual violence (Szekeres, Shuman, & Saguy, 2020), they are also spaces in which unfiltered reactions to disclosure are shared. Vloggers emphasize that negative social reactions are a significant deterrent to breaking the silence. By saying 'me too' publicly on social media, they risk receiving negative social reactions beyond friends and family; anyone with an IP address and an opinion can weigh in.

Kate did not want to disclose her story publicly for a long time because "I see how people drag people. Part of the #MeToo movement, like. They victim shame, they victim blame, like I'm sure still somebody's gonna be like, 'And you waited this long to tell this? You waited this long to say something? You're not even gonna tell the name of the guys? You not gonna go to the police? Why say anything?'" (Kate, 2019, 41:38) Criticism is a valid fear, given the level of scrutiny placed on survivors of sexual violence – including within coverage of the #MeToo movement itself (Ilinskaya & Robinson, 2018). Fear of being shamed and blamed contributed to Kate's decision to stay silent for nearly six years:

> It's easy to tell somebody to get over it. It's easy to tell somebody: 'Why would you come forward now?' It's easy to do that. And I didn't want anybody doing me that. I didn't want anybody, you know, victim blaming me and shaming me. I didn't want to do it. I always see the stories, I would see people blaming the victim. 'Oh, your dress was too short', 'Oh, you shouldn't've been drinking', 'Oh, why was you even over there, you knew better'.

> Like, everybody blames the victim instead of blaming the rapist. And I always found that so, just so like, fucked up. (Kate, 2019, 42:16)

While she recognizes the personal importance of participating in the movement, she fears incurring negative social reactions from the anonymous masses – and this fear nearly dissuaded her from posting her vlog. Kate and several other vloggers make a point to ask viewers not to leave negative comments below their vlog.

Although #MeToo illuminates the pervasive social problem of sexual violence, the structures supporting it continue to exist. The #MeToo movement was introduced to a world only partially transformed by feminist activism (McKinney, 2021) and widespread social change does not happen quickly. McKinney (2021) discusses the enduring social repercussions for survivors who post on #MeToo:

> …despite rumors, open secrets, jokes that are actually warnings, and political organizing, to actually publicly tell one's story about being sexually coerced is uniquely exposing and a different genre of action. One risks being ignored, disbelieved, or further harassed by the public. One can lose his or her job, friends, and support networks. In effect, even now during the fervor of #MeToo making sexual coercion public is to risk one's material safety and sense of self. (McKinney, 2021, p. 85)

The decision to publicly share trauma still can incur backlash. Not every comment posted online will have the best interests of the survivor in mind and learning how to identify and resist rape myths is valuable in maintaining positive mental health as a participant in #MeToo. Three of the 12 vlogs I focus on in this study have been removed since I viewed them in 2020, possibly due to backlash or fear of retaliation.

Combating Rape Myths

Research about sexual violence post-#MeToo suggests that public attitudes about sexual violence have notably improved. For example, Bogen et al. (2021) perform a qualitative analysis of 1660 #MeToo tweets to understand the hashtag's use and efficacy. They find that most online reactions to tweets in their sample were positive: 509 of 763 responses (67%). They attribute these findings to increasingly critical social attitudes about sexual violence.

#MeToo's ability to shift public perceptions of sexual violence is also addressed by Szekeres et al. (2020) who compare American public opinion pre- and post-#MeToo. Across four surveys (two prior to the movement's viral fame, one at the peak, and one six months after) with 500 respondents, they find that sexual assault allegations after #MeToo were taken more seriously, met less dismissively, and granted more attention by the individuals to whom respondents disclosed. Despite this research that demonstrates #MeToo's positive social effects, vloggers warn that rape myths remain prevalent, so the social responsibility to work against sexual violence is still vital.

Sydney's experience of sexual violence in high school led her to the #MeToo movement and, when she experienced sexual violence a second time at work, she realized she could not stay silent any longer: "I had very few people in my corner saying that what he did was wrong, what the person in my past did was wrong, and I needed to stand up for myself for once" (Sydney, 2020, 9:02). She began advocating for herself by pursuing a complaint against her co-worker. Once she began sharing her story, the backlash was immediate and intense. It came down to her word against her assailant's – and his advocates were louder. She describes how she "went through months of just people talking behind my back and treating me like shit" (Sydney, 2020, 13:04), which culminated in her complaint being dismissed as false and her assailant receiving a promotion. Sydney is in therapy and working towards healing, but the widespread narrative that she lied about

her experience of sexual violence and the lack of consequences for her assailant negatively impacts her mental health every day.

Linda describes how she reacts to responses she has received herself and heard from other survivors in her sexual violence awareness club: 'it makes me angry when people are like, 'Well, you were fucking drunk' or 'You were like this' or 'Look what you're wearing'. Like, fuck. You can't tell me that, you have to be able to control yourself" (Linda, 2020, 22:46). These negative social attitudes about sexual violence and victimization have significant impacts on survivors, as she delineates:

> Like time to time, I can go back and forth from a victim to a survivor and it … and I'm just so tired of people like blaming the victim. Like, stop victim blaming, you know? […] We didn't want that, and it makes me mad when people are like: 'Well, she's fucked this many guys and she's had consensual sex with like 10 guys.' Like I don't give a fuck, she still got raped. I don't care if one out of 10 guys like she didn't consent to like … that motherfucker still raped her. Just cause her body count is 10 doesn't mean that she wasn't raped. That's rape. And it's rape, it's rape, it's rape! You know, because if you don't want it, that's fucking rape. Why won't people get that. (Linda, 2020, 31:48)

Such attitudes demonstrate that rape myths persist and are deeply engrained. While steadily becoming less socially acceptable, these myths continue to represent sexual violence victimization as specific and exclusive, which alienates many women who experience sexual violence. They also complicate survivors' definitions of what it means to be 'victim' or 'survivor.' Internalizing these rape myths can affect whether survivors are able to recognize their experiences as violence and identify as survivors (Palmer et al., 2021).

When Jillian was assaulted in a shared hotel room on a group trip to Colorado in 2020, she did not consider reporting it until she arrived back home and disclosed to her mother. She feared that police would learn that there had been drugs involved, which led her to delay calling them for weeks. Nevertheless, Jillian eventually concluded that she wanted to report her assault: "I tried to tell [my friend] that I was not OK with what happened and that I was gonna be reporting to the police, and she told me to go to sleep and we'll figure it out in the morning. And then she tells me in the morning that she's not picking sides and that she loves us both" (Jillian, 2020, 20:07). She lost her friends and support system because they wanted to maintain a relationship with her assailant. Jillian did not have any evidence to validate her experience, and no one came forward to support her. Consequently, the police decided not to press charges.

Makayla woke up on her friend's couch to the flash of a camera. Paralyzed with fear, she lay on the couch as her assailant pushed her pajamas out of the way and masturbated over her body. Once he left, she called her friend to take her home and immediately began the process of reporting her assault to the police and charging her assailant. His phone was luckily confiscated before he could post any pictures of her assault online. Worse than the threat of having her experience publicly scrutinized was "Them. Them as in the ones who blame me. The ones who said I ruined your life [by speaking out via #MeToo]. The ones who said I asked for it. The ones who only cared about you but didn't care to hear the truth" (Makayla, 2019, 6:07). He was found guilty and sentenced to prison. Still, Makayla is often characterized on social media as the person who ruined her assailant's life.

Makayla was the only survivor in my sample who achieved justice through the criminal justice system. Even so, her assailant was found guilty on the basis of a contingent technicality. His conspicuous watch was evident in the photos he took while assaulting her and when he wore

the same watch to court, he was linked to the photos and assault beyond reasonable doubt, which finally forced him to admit his guilt. Unfortunately, the positive resolution to Makayla's case is statistically unlikely to be shared by most survivors. Notably, even when there is a legal resolution for survivors, the pain and trauma can have lasting effects beyond the verdict.

Denial of Perpetrator Guilt

Denial of perpetrator guilt, the most likely outcome of reporting sexual violence to the police, involves denial of the experience or denial that it happened without consent. In both cases, the perpetrator escapes taking accountability for their actions, thus perpetuating rape myths about survivor culpability. The American Rape and Incest National Network (RAINN) estimates that out of every 1000 sexual assaults in America, only 310 are reported to police. Of these assailants, only 25 will be incarcerated (RAINN, 2021). Since October 17th, 2017, nearly 18 million survivors have broken their silences (Suk et al., 2021). Despite the prevalence of the movement, dominant social attitudes about sexual violence and consent often allow assailants to escape punitive measures. The burden of proving that an assault occurred is placed on the victim and, as Jillian's case demonstrates, police often decide not to pursue cases when they believe there is not enough evidence that a crime has occurred.

A contributing factor in Jillian's decision to wait before reporting her assault was her assailant's claim that what occurred was consensual. When Jillian woke up in the shared hotel room without the pants she went to sleep in, she asked her assailant what happened: "I said: 'Did we have sex?' And he said: 'Yes.' And that's when I started processing … trying to process the memory of us having sex because I don't remember any of it. […] I was shocked because I would never fucking have sex with him. Not in my right, left, or wrong mind. […] And he said 'It's not like I raped you.' And in that moment, I knew" (Jillian, 2020, 8:28). Her assailant continued to

insist that he was not a rapist, and even tried to reach out to people in Jillian's life to share his version of the assault. His denial of guilt and lack of accountability worked in his favour, because he was never questioned by the police following her report.

Even with access to digital evidence, legal cases are often dropped due to the burden of proof involved. For example, the legal battle between Britney and her assailant lasted nearly two years, through which time her active involvement was required at every step. Despite having texts from her assailant admitting his guilt, he insisted that her rape was consensual "and that he didn't know I was crying, despite saying he's sorry he didn't stop when he saw me crying. The CPS felt like there wasn't enough evidence to ensure a guilty verdict" (Britney, 2020, 27:28). Her case was dropped. Britney describes the arduous and ultimately ineffective process of proving guilt; she believes that at the end of the day it comes down to one person's word against the other's: "…let's go to the extreme of someone had video evidence that they were being raped. How can they then say that that was rape and that wasn't just rough sex caught on video? Or like roleplay, you know. And that's, that's the problem with proving rape" (Britney, 2020, 29:02). The burden of proof is born by the survivor. And, if the survivor fails to prove that their assault was non-consensual, then they risk being branded a liar in the public eye (McKinney, 2021).

Britney describes this disparity between actual justice and perceived justice: "And just because someone isn't brought to justice, or someone's found not guilty, it doesn't mean that they are guilty or not. Do you know what I mean? Like there are guilty people that have gone free, and there are free people that have been made guilty. It's one of the hardest crimes to prove" (Britney, 2020, 29:21). Although a verdict was served in her case, no justice was served for the victim of the perpetrated crime. Instead, her assailant walks free, and public perception supports his innocence. She warns survivors that this outcome is likely and strongly advises that any survivor

looking to pursue legal action be prepared for a disappointing verdict. Her assailant's staunch denial of her experience is frustrating, but it also significantly harmed her mental health, about which she warns other survivors.

For example, Tina's second assailant adopted a similar attitude of denial, invalidating her experience and putting immense strain on her mental health. The day after she was drugged and assaulted at a Greek-letter party, she was invited over by her friend to watch the Superbowl. When she woke in his room without memory of the night's events, she asked her assailant what happened, "and he goes like, 'Tina, you don't remember?' And I go like, 'Remember what?' And he goes, 'Last night I was fucking you and you started yelling and started to tell me to get away from you and that you hated me, and you ran into my closet and just started like yelling in there.' And like I right away started panicking" (Tina, 2020, 10:03). Her assailant's language confused her because "why would anybody think that a girl would wanna have sex the day after she got raped?" (Tina, 2020, 11:33). Immediately she asked him to take her to the emergency room, and he diverted her by taking her on a walk instead. By the time she broke her silence and resisted both his and her sorority sisters' attempts to minimize and normalize her assault, the sheets at the fraternity house were long washed, with any evidence of her presence there erased. Both of her assailants continue to deny her version of the story and no resolution has been made in her judicial case.

Denial of perpetrator guilt is also exemplified in Star's vlog, which indicates that the posting was prompted by her mother's confrontation of her assailant, who vehemently denied Star's allegations. Star describes her own more recent interaction with him, someone who lived in her home and abused her throughout childhood. During this particular encounter, he called her into his study – the same room in which he forced her to watch pornography for the first time as a child – and questioned why she was avoiding him now that she had moved out. Star describes finally

confronting her abuser and explaining that her avoidance was a direct consequence of his sexually violent actions. In reaction, she watches her abuser ball his hands into fists. He threatens to hit her if she does not leave his office and drop the subject. Star says, "When he said that, I was so happy. I'll finally have physical proof of something happening to me. Anything happening to me. I can press charges. I can call the police. They have to believe me. I have physical proof" (Star, 2020, 7:18). She describes "missing her opportunity" as he loosens his fists and she leaves the room. Star's wish for more tangible evidence of the abuse she has endured is unfortunately a common survivor experience.

The signs of sexual violence and trauma are not always visible. Many of the vloggers emphasize the difficulty of proving sexual violence in the criminal justice system given the burden of proof required to obtain a guilty verdict. Even after #MeToo, there continues to be considerable disadvantage to living as a survivor of sexual violence.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I deepened my analysis of women's representations of #MeToo as a digital feminist social movement by exploring their understandings of the movement's goals – breaking the silence, resisting the structures of sexual violence, and empowering survivors through empathy – as exemplified through vlog discussions of voice, resistance, and survivor solidarity. The latter concept extends to their understandings of #MeToo as a mechanism of silence-breaking that affects other survivors.

I also analyzed the drawbacks my participants identify with participation, including the emotional burden of disclosure precipitated in part by the continued persistent rape myths. Moreover, they describe the negative effects of perpetrator's denying their guilt, and the pain of

having their traumatic experience invalidated by their assailants. Despite these risks, vloggers emphasize the numerous benefits of participation, and they encourage those who can to break their silences, even if in a simple direct message.

By having survivors at the forefront of the movement, #MeToo aides in the fight to end sexual violence. Vloggers in my study embody the goals of the #MeToo movement and recognize the potential impact that their vlogs may have on other survivors of sexual violence. In this regard, they represent the power of #MeToo through interpersonal communication and empathy in a social context that continues to justify sexual violence and silence survivors.

Chapter Six: The Future of #MeToo

The #MeToo movement began in 2006, when Tarana Burke identified the lack of community support available for Black women and girl survivors of sexual violence in her local area (Burke, 2021). Burke foregrounds a community perspective on sexual violence, given that "a lot of us live and work and learn and worship and exist in the same places we were harmed. Which means that we also live, exist, and work and worship among the people who harmed us" (Burke, 2021, 17:13). When trusted community members enact sexual violence, the community often has difficulty separating the good they've done from the harm they've caused, leading to a culture of complicity (Burke, 2021). Burke herself was silenced by community members who did not want her to risk the stability of their community by sharing her experience of sexual violence. She felt empowered to break this silence and begin talking about her experiences after recognizing the power of empowerment through empathy.

The exponential growth of this small community initiative into a viral digital social movement has certainly been accompanied by growing pains. But Burke argues that, when #MeToo became a hashtag following Alyssa Milano's 2017 tweet, it remained committed to the same fundamental purpose: to enable survivors to find community, to know that they are not alone in their experiences of sexual violence (Burke, 2021). The empathy fostered by #MeToo through heartfelt survivor to survivor conversations about sexual violence has supported and empowered survivors to break their individual silences – both in public with social media posts tagging #MeToo and in private through disclosures to family and friends.

Scholars do not fully understand #MeToo in terms of what the movement is and what it is doing for individual lives. The body of research and academic scholarship examines the impact of #MeToo on various social institutions and critiques its claims of inclusivity by drawing attention

to the marginalized groups that are most at risk for sexual violence but are often excluded from media coverage and mainstream discussions of #MeToo: Indigenous peoples, Black women and girls, and LGBTQIA2S+ communities (Gomez & Gobin, 2019; van Rijswijk, 2020; Ison, 2019). The difficulty ensues when sexual violence is discussed with #MeToo "as a single event that disrupts one's life, rather than as an experience along a continuum of various forms of violence, routinely punctuating the lives of women in particular socio-cultural and political situations, who may not see their experience as 'traumatic' given the extent to which trauma marks their very existence" (Loney-Howes, 2018, p. 31). For example, when rape is depicted as occurring only under specific and exclusive circumstances, the rape myth that sexual violence only qualifies if society deems it so is perpetuated, which alienates from the movement survivors who experience sexual violence so often that it underscores their very existence (Loney-Howes, 2018). Internalizing this rape myth, alongside that of the 'ideal survivor', further oppresses marginalized survivors; they do not meet the strict criteria regarding who is and is not credible as a survivor.

As Quan-Haase et al. (2021) demonstrate in their review of the literature on #MeToo, there is limited qualitative research on women's experiences of the movement and the impact this participation has had on their everyday lives. While I was unable to access their everyday lives, by analyzing their vlogs I was able to access the women's representations of their experiences. I was primarily concerned with understanding these experiences, particularly how individual women think and feel about this digital feminist social movement, due to my perception that #MeToo was making meaningful interventions in the lives of survivors around me. I wondered about the movement's impact on the lives of other survivors, beyond the platform it provides for participatory declarations of 'me too'. This initial question of #MeToo's social use and affordances sparked the research process in 2019, when I was surprised to find little research that specifically

addresses what #MeToo is doing for women. Inspired by Dougherty's *The Anatomy of Silence* (2019), I then refined my interest to focus on 'breaking the silence' that structures sexual violence, which Dougherty identifies as a significant intervention accomplished by #MeToo participants. I chose survivor vlogs as the data source for analysis, given that they are experiential narratives rich in description, easily accessible (especially important when conducting research in the pandemic context), and provide insight into my research questions without the risk of re-traumatizing the vulnerable population of sexual violence survivors, which is more likely in interview-based methodologies.

Analytically, I sought to understand how women represent their experiences of #MeToo as a digital feminist social movement that aims to break the silence about sexual violence. The women in my sample identify several mechanisms of silence that the movement enabled them to articulate, share with other survivors, and resist themselves. I developed these mechanisms into a four-part typology: social reactions, internalized rape myths, emotional and psychological trauma, and barriers to justice. Vloggers delineate the goals of the movement (breaking the silence, resisting rape myths, and empowering survivors through empathy) through discussions of voice, resistance, and survivor solidarity. They also recognize how their engagement with #MeToo –
posting experiential narratives in video form – functions as a mechanism of silence-breaking that may positively affect other survivors of sexual violence, offering advice and extending personal support. The drawbacks women identify with participating in #MeToo – the emotional burden of disclosure, the continuous need to combat rape myths, and likelihood that perpetrators will deny guilt – can be considered an extension of this advice and support; vloggers seek engagement with other survivors in the shared community network of empathy that #MeToo has created.

My analysis demonstrates that vloggers frame the #MeToo movement as providing a virtual resistant space for survivors to congregate and empathize with each other. While many feminist hashtag campaigns have been launched on Twitter, #MeToo makes a novel intervention through its survivor-led focus. Vloggers indicate that #MeToo is more than just a moment on the internet; they experience it as a lasting movement dedicated to dismantling the structures that silence survivors of sexual violence.

Nevertheless, it remains risky to say 'me too'. Navigating life as a survivor of sexual violence continues to be difficult in a society in which rape myths must constantly be challenged. The women in my sample identify this as a drawback to participation, in addition to the emotional burdens of disclosure and denial of perpetrator guilt. However, there are other risks they did not discuss, particularly those faced by marginalized communities that are most at risk for sexual violence (see Decker et al., 2019; Gómez & Gobin, 2019; Ison, 2019; van Risjwijk, 2020)

By analyzing these vlogs, I learned about how #MeToo as a digital feminist social movement has impacted 12 individual survivors. This is a relatively small sample, and I encourage future research efforts that collect and analyze more survivor perspectives and provide deeper and intersectional insights into these experiences on a wider scale. A larger sample may demonstrate how racially and sexually marginalized survivors think and feel about #MeToo, adding valuable insight to our understanding of the social value of this digital feminist social movement. Conducting in-person interviews with survivors, as Mendes and Ringrose (2019) did, would allow researchers to collect detailed information about survivors' social positionings, which would then enable a meaningful intersectional analysis of experiences of #MeToo that was not possible given my data source.

Vlogs, while exclusive to YouTube and other video sharing websites, offer detailed experiential testimony – without risk of re-traumatization through the research process. Beyond YouTube, analyzing the perspectives of survivors who say #MeToo in posts across other social media websites is another potentially productive research avenue that could enhance our understandings of the significance of #MeToo in the lives of survivors. To put the sheer amount of such available information in context, videos posted under #MeToo on the social media platform TikTok have amassed 1.2 billion views. Survivors in my sample also point to the importance of Instagram, Reddit, and Facebook in their individual journeys to the #MeToo movement. The hashtag remains relevant and highly populated across these sites, providing rich, first-hand data and presenting a novel way to research vulnerable populations without posing risk.

As for the #MeToo movement itself, the activism initiated by Tarana Burke in 2006 has evolved, and such evolution must continue if the movement hopes to dismantle the structures of sexual violence. Including marginalized survivors more comprehensively, particularly by encouraging and supporting those most at risk for sexual violence is a necessary step. Encouraging survivors to take the lead in creating robust and vital safe spaces to speak up about their experiences of violence, but also receive support in silence, promotes the community initiative launched by Burke.

In addition to more comprehensive amplification of survivor voices, the movement could also evolve by expanding its focus to attend particularly to campus-based sexual violence. Mobilizing and engaging on university and college campuses would be a positive intervention in a spatial location that is markedly dangerous for women and girls. This necessity is recognized by my participant Tina, who had to organize her own campus initiative to protest the Greek-letter culture after her double assault over Superbowl weekend at a University of Fresno State fraternity

party. #MeToo could put out a call to action for the creation of survivor-led charters on university and college campuses to intervene in this dangerous space and empower young woman survivors.

The #MeToo movement connected millions of survivors to Burke's community initiative essentially overnight. This initiative, which initially focused on the systemic issue of silenced Black women and girls in the United States now seeks to deconstruct sexual violence on a large scale, acknowledging the need to resist and dismantle all relevant oppressive structures. Despite its apparent social and feminist significance #MeToo's impact on survivors is not robustly analyzed in academic scholarship. Burke (2021, 43:22) claims that "survivors are at the heart of the work. And if they're not, it's not the work." Hopefully, future research on the #MeToo movement and its significance for resisting sexual violence will centre and prioritize the voices that broke the silence by saying 'me too'.

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Appendix A

Participant Demographics

Vlog Number	User Name[4]	Date Posted	Views[5]	Location	Race/Ethnicity[6]
01	Tina	March 3, 2020	44,481	United States	Not disclosed
02	Heidi	June 24, 2020	12,660	United States	Not disclosed – White passing
03	Leslie	June 5th, 2020	8,762	United States	Asian
04	Makayla	December 18th, 2019	7,484	United States	Not disclosed – White passing
05	Britney	May 3rd, 2020	2,803	United Kingdom	Not disclosed – White passing
06	Alyssa	October 23rd, 2019	1,938	United States	Not disclosed – White passing
07	Kate	December 31st, 2019	1,333	United States	Black
08	Rachel	November 10th, 2019	1,090	N/A	Not disclosed – White passing
09	Sydney	March 17th, 2020	908	United States	Not disclosed – White passing
10	Jillian	July 31st, 2020	775	N/A	Not disclosed
11	Star	April 9th, 2020	523	N/A	Not disclosed – White passing
12	Linda	March 12th, 2020	495	United States	Not disclosed

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[4] All names have been pseudonymized to protect the identities of the vloggers.
[5] Views reflect data collected September 10th, 2020.
[6] Race of vloggers is rarely given outright and open to interpretation. Notably, the majority are white passing.