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Online Feminist Activism as Performative Consciousness-Raising: A #MeToo Case Study

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Introduction

Consciousness-raising has been formally employed as a feminist campaign tactic since at least the initial suffragette movement (Ryan, 1992). The broader motivation for consciousness-raising groups stemmed from the concept that the 'personal is political' (Hanisch, 1970) and that these groups can in turn create spaces in which women would become conscious of their own personal and private oppressions, and subsequently seek political reparation (see Loney-Howes, this collection).

Contemporary feminist research contends that feminist activism and discussion in online spaces can be conceptualized as a form of consciousness-raising (Clark, 2015; Martin & Valenti, 2012). However, others have problematized this practice, arguing that engaging with men in online spaces can lead to an obstruction of feminist organizing online and cases of harassment and abuse (Long, 2015; Megarry, 2017).

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This chapter argues that feminist activism and discussion in social media spaces are a valid and worthwhile form of contemporary consciousness-raising, and further contends that this practice is a specific, and valuable, way of performing identity and activism. Firstly, the chapter examines the importance of feminist activism in social media spaces by using #MeToo as a case study.

Secondly, we move to conceptualizing participation in online feminist campaigns, such as the #MeToo campaign on Twitter, as a specific type of performance—one in which actors can move into and out of the audience's eye by choice. Sociologist and environment theatre practitioners Schechner and Schuman (1976) argued there is little difference between theatre and ordinary life and says of the two that they are an arrangement of space and bodies in places and that the differences lie in how conscious all players are, or can be, of the conventions, the rules that define the games—and how these rules can change. This idea of space as a player, something that can be performed, or that performs you, as well as deciphering theatre and social interactions according to consciousness or context (whether you are in a theatre or online) is significant when considering #MeToo as a performance of consciousness-raising. Performers of #MeToo are conscious of a specific audience, the platform (or space) they perform it in, and the general script that is delivered. As women speak out about their respective assaults, abuse, harassments, and rapes, the public, their audience, is invited to participate by either joining the chorus of #MeToo's or to simply bear witness. This type of personal storytelling as a way to unburden, enlighten, and oftentimes empower mirrors that of what we have seen as consciousness-raising throughout history.

As a practice, consciousness-raising can be understood to have grown beyond its first- and second-wave origins. By expanding our view of consciousness-raising to have crossed offline borders and moved into online spaces, and to resultantly have feminist actors engage with people that fall outside understandings of the label 'woman', we view the performance of consciousness-raising (which is to say the performance of a particular feminist identity, gender, and personal storytelling) to hold continued value and relevance in contemporary feminism. Consciousness-raising as a performance of feminist identity in turn may involve an

expression of one's feelings, a sharing of lived experiences, and an evaluation and reinforcement of others' stories.

Consciousness-Raising Across the Waves

Ryan (1992, p. 46) has argued that consciousness-raising groups[1] initially served to 'explore women's common gender experiences'. The formation of consciousness-raising groups across feminism's second wave was designed as a way for women to learn about patriarchal structures of domination, but they also served as a way for women to 'unleash pent-up hostility and rage about being victimized' (Hooks, 2000, p. 8). The practicalities of consciousness-raising groups were straightforward: according to Pilcher and Whelehan (2004, p. 28), women 'should regularly collect in small groups over an agreed period of time and give accounts of their own lives and how they "became" a "woman"'. To this, Loss (2011, p. 288) adds that the recounting of these 'personal and group histories could serve as a powerful wellspring for political mobilization'.

Consciousness-raising groups therefore laid the foundation for broader actions and movements; they acted, as hooks argues, as 'sites of conversion' (2000, p. 8). The groups included 'organizers who encouraged each woman to contribute her own experiences… [and] then discussed forms of resisting oppression, actions, and organising new consciousness-raising groups' (Sowards & Renegar, 2004, p. 535). Kathie Sarachild's programme for consciousness-raising in the second wave contained the following outline of what she envisioned the groups to aspire to:

1. Ongoing consciousness expansion

    • Personal recognition and testimony

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[1] Consciousness-raising has never been an activity exclusive to feminists alone. Liberal movements of the 1960s also encompassed consciousness-raising as a tactic, including gay men's organizations (Weeks, 2007) and civil rights campaigns (Behrent, 2013; Evans, 1979; Lasch-Quinn, 2002). The use of consciousness-raising more broadly can be seen as a consequence of the structural nature of oppression and disempowerment: although the experiences of women, gay men, and people of colour were different in nature, they each owed their oppressions to structures of domination, violence, and discrimination.

– Recalling and sharing our bitter experiences
– Expressing our feelings about our experiences both at the time they occurred and at present
– Expressing our feelings about ourselves, men, and other women
– Evaluating our feelings

Although Sarachild described her proposed programme for consciousness-raising as a 'hunch of what a theory of mass consciousness-raising would look like' (1968, p. 79), it holds many commonalities with the wider #MeToo movement: specifically, the sharing of 'bitter experiences' and the personal testimonies recounted by participants. Campbell (1999) challenges the view of consciousness-raising as taking place in small group interactions, and instead points to the aforementioned features as also occurring in essays and speeches—and adds that these stylistic features are 'public and political rather than private and personal' (1999, p.130). Sowards and Renegar (2004) have also noted that third-wave feminism used popular culture as a viable forum to communicate feminist ideas and that there were numerous instances of the practice taking place within more public settings. Although the two did not clearly identify online activities as a feature of more contemporary forms of consciousness-raising, they did state that third-wave approaches to consciousness-raising had 'adapted to the changing cultural climate [by seeking] to address larger and more public audiences' (2004, p. 547).

Consequently, it can be understood that contemporary consciousness-raising has grown beyond our understanding of its second-wave forms. This chapter uses both Sarachild's (1968) and Campbell's (1999) descriptions of consciousness-raising to draw similarities between second-wave practice and contemporary feminist activism on social media platforms. In particular, it contends that this practice is a specific, and valuable, way of performing identity and activism.

We are not alone in making this contention: recent research has turned to consider how hashtags can be used to raise consciousness. Anderson and Grace's 2015 article examines feminist consciousness-raising within a digital motherhood community and how an online Facebook group assisted mothers in performing feminist activism and provided a space for them to carry out their feminist identity through consciousness-raising

practices. Rentschler and Thrift (2015) argue that the sharing and experience of feminism in an online space provided a form of consciousness-raising in which women felt that they belonged to a wider feminist community. Ultimately, Rentschler and Thrift (2015, p. 341) suggest that the result of online consciousness-raising has led to feminists in virtual spaces producing, curating, and deploying:

> Their capacity to respond to sexist statements and misogynist practices in the political sphere and popular culture, remixing those practices toward feminist ends. In the process, they help build a larger networked feminist public.

In particular, the analysis of feminist hashtags has dominated much of the recent literature. Feminist researchers have published pieces examining the use of hashtags for campaigns such as #YesAllWomen (Thrift, 2014), #BringBackOurGirls (Loken, 2014), and #KadınKatliamıVar (translated as 'there is a massacre of women' in Turkish) (Altinay, 2014). Laura Portwood-Stacer and Susan Berridge note that feminist hashtags have the ability to be 'taken up by newspapers, television, and other media outlets as stories of collective public opinion and, sometimes, further action' (2014, p. 1090).

Researchers also have observed the ability of the hashtag to assist campaigners in promoting broad feminist attitudes. For example, in a 2017 article, Kangere, Kemitare, and Michau share the story of the Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Prevention Network and their efforts to use social media campaigns and hashtags to 'populariz[e] feminism' and undertake 'feminist consciousness-raising' (Kangere, Kemitare, & Michau, 2017, p. 900). Elsewhere, Rentschler (2017, p. 6) also notes that the Black feminist hashtag #YouOkSis? 'does the labour of consciousness-raising about the problems with carceral answers to street harassment'. Finally, Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller have also argued that the #MeToo hashtag has allowed the public to engage with 'resistance and challenges to sexism, patriarchy and other forms of oppression' who otherwise might not have been interested in engaging with feminist ideas (2018, p. 237).

The evolution outlined above—one of consciousness-raising efforts shifting from their occurrence within closed groups to also taking place

online and in public discussions—is a key feature of contemporary feminist practice. By *publicly* discussing *personal* stories of sexual harassment, the #MeToo hashtag participants undertake visible consciousness-raising and highlight misogyny and sexism within online and offline spaces. Furthermore, the use of a hashtag to perform consciousness-raising is useful for uniting many conversations and disparate users within a single community (Mendes et al., 2018). #MeToo acts as a chorus of sorts, when one person shares their experience and then tags it with #MeToo: in turn, this call and response technique transforms one person's story into a wider non-individualized testimony (see Mendes & Ringrose, this collection).

Hashtags are therefore an effective way of quickly and collectively engaging in activist discourse (Williams, 2015). Hashtags are searchable, quantifiable, and contagious. When we use a hashtag, we are publicly participating in a specific discourse and are in effect saying 'search this #, and you will find me'. It is with this concept of people using hashtags as a way to have their story seen and heard that we argue that an individual's use of the #MeToo hashtag in turn engages them in a specific and conscious performance.

Performing #MeToo, Identity, and Public Participation

Within the first 24 hours of Alyssa Milano's tweet (see Introduction), the #MeToo hashtag had spawned over 500,000 tweets and 12 million separate Facebook comments, posts, or reactions, with Facebook estimating that 45% of its US users had a friend who had posted 'me too' (CBS, 2017). Due to the sheer volume of these contributions, we have narrowed our focus to particular individual contributions to the #MeToo movement and how participation in #MeToo can be conceptualized as a form of contemporary consciousness-raising and a type of performance.

This chapter takes a qualitative approach to the data generated by the #MeToo hashtag and relies on Foucauldian discourse analysis to uncover the blatant and latent meanings attached to those who participated in the

initial hashtag. Discourse analysis 'examines how language and representation fuse together to produce meaning, with particular attention paid to how the intersections of representation, meaning, power, identities, and subjectivities all create relationships with each other' (Harp, Grimm, & Loke, 2018, p. 6). In this chapter, discourse analysis is applied to a series of tweets posted in the #MeToo hashtag stream, in order to further understand the efforts of consciousness-raising performed by contributors in this particular social media space.

In a similar approach to that previously used by Rentschler (2017), we avoid drawing on techniques of web-scraping and large-scale data mining of the tweets that mentioned #MeToo. Instead, we have sought to analyse how individual Twitter users produced and shared their experiences through the hashtag. Although the #MeToo hashtag quickly spread from Twitter to other social media platforms, we chose to restrict our analysis to Twitter hashtags. In line with other research-examining hashtags (Brown, 2018; Harp et al., 2018; Kim, 2017), we collected a series of initial tweets from the #MeToo hashtag from October 15 to October 16, 2017. Further search parameters included the requirements that the tweets could be in any language, from any country, and with Twitter's quality filter (designed to filter out spam) turned off. The tweets then selected for discussion within this chapter were gathered from what Twitter had deemed to be the 'top' tweets within the #MeToo hashtag that were sent during this time period. Twitter has previously outlined that that it considers 'top' tweets to be those that 'are the most relevant tweets for your search', contingent on the user's specific search terms, and are determined through an algorithm (Twitter, 2018a).

What is evident from examining #MeToo is the level at which women publicly shared their personal stories. Women who have held onto their trauma for decades are speaking out by the millions (CBS, 2017); and although the movement was initially anticipated by some to 'fade into the background again' (Renkl, 2017), its subsequent longevity leads us to highlight its importance. Why this hashtag? Why now? Although some answers may lie in the initial news reports of widespread sexual harassment across celebrated and prominent industries such as entertainment (Ricker, 2018; USA Today, 2018), a broader understanding can also be drawn from the power of performing a story.

We can conceptualize Twitter as an online 'stage' of sorts: the platform is the space where the performance occurs; the performer is the author of the tweet; and the performance is the conscious and considered script that they construct and perform in 140–280 characters. Extending this conceptualization, a performer's 'audience' can be further gathered by way of the hashtag. A performer can assemble an audience by using a specific hashtag in their tweets. A person's use of a hashtag may also indicate their knowledge of a certain audience and how their tweet may subsequently be received: people rarely post things on public online forums such as Twitter without considering the reception and how they will be perceived as most people are conscious of upholding a certain perceived identity (Shreffler, Hancock, & Schmidt, 2016). Engaging with a particular hashtag is an indication of a sense of awareness or knowledge of a particular issue and its affected audience: thus anyone who uses this hashtag may have already considered how it will be received.

J.L. Austin first theorized performativity as to say something is to do something (1955). Since then, performativity theory has been taken elsewhere to help us understand our identities, our social personas, and impression management (Goffman, 1959), as well as how even our gender is socially constructed and performed (Butler, 1999). We contend that when women participate in a space such as Twitter by sharing their stories, their performance is subsumed within performativity—the language they use to express themselves and share their experiences is both performative and a performance for a broader audience (Gregson & Rose, 2000). There are many intersections that can be considered when analysing this specific type of performance—gender, the online space as a player,[2] power, public participation, and identity. By saying #MeToo, a person is *doing* an action. They are participating in political discourse, joining an ensemble of women and other victim/survivors, using an online (public) tool, and some are identifying as a feminist (however

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[2] 'The online space as a player' merges both Richard Schechner's and Mady Schuman's (1976) performance theory concept (that posits we must consider the affect of space/environment when analysing performance and performativity) and Michel Callon (1986) and Bruno Latour's (1999) actor network theory (which asserts that everything in the social and natural worlds exist in constantly shifting networks of relationship). We contend that platforms like Twitter shape what people say and disclose: not necessarily deliberately but even an element such as a character limit actively affects what is said and how it is said.

broadly they may interpret that identity), allies, a victim-survivor, (most likely) a woman, and an activist. The idea of space as a player is important to consider, as Gregson and Rose extrapolate:

> Specific performances bring these spaces into being. And since these performances are themselves articulations of power, of particular subject positions, […] we need to think of spaces too as performative power relations. (2000, p. 441)

So how big a part does Twitter or Facebook actually play in the #MeToo performance? Returning to the work of Schechner and Schuman (1976), when we consider social media as the game or theatrical space, the performers play with a certain level of consciousness. They use the hashtag to ensure visibility and participation and to attempt to establish an audience. They tell their story in as many characters as the platform allows and they employ the language they have been socialized to use when sharing their story of abuse. Language such as 'you are not alone', 'speak your truth', and 'don't give up' are common idioms and phrases that apply to many scenarios. However, when used in this context the terms conjure feelings of solidarity and empowerment. Twitter also encourages audience participation by replying, re-tweeting, or favouriting the tweet—the performer is then notified on how their performance was received, a favourite or a re-tweet is like an applause or endorsement, validation. A reply could mean someone is actively listening, are saying 'me too' in addition to you, or in the worst-case scenario 'boo-ing' your performance by trolling and/or dismissing your testimony. Not only are the authors of these tweets being judged on how well they are performing victimhood (or survivorship), but additionally, both their feminist identity (if they identify as such) and the way they orient their claim are also open for critique.

#MeToo Storytelling as Consciousness-Raising

Milano's initial tweet posed the scenario of what would happen if 'all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote "Me too"' (Milano, as cited in Renkl, 2017). A large number of tweets within the

responses followed this narrative, with users adding the #MeToo hashtag to their tweet. Some were fairly straightforward: a number of people chose to simply copy Milano's tweet and added 'Me too' above or below it, such as this simple tweet[3]:

> Me too #MeToo

However, a number of users also chose to add descriptions of their experience (or experiences) of sexual harassment, assault, or rape. These varied from relatively vague accounts of experiences to explicit descriptions:

> I'm fortunate enough to have escaped when he pushed me into an empty room #MeToo
>
> I was made to grovel for forgiveness, and lie about the incident so the person wouldn't be exposed. Young and scared, I conformed #MeToo
>
> I will never forget the first time I was 5 years old. The sitter's husband was my first abuser but not my last #MeToo
>
> Raped at 6 by someone I admired. He stole my innocence, but not my spirit. I was determined to be a better person than he was and now I am #MeToo
>
> I suffer from #PTSD as a result of being raped. I want every one who also hurts to know you are not alone. It is still harrowing. #MeToo
>
> Molested by a family member. Raped as a kid and an adult. Became a drug addict, then overcame. Don't ever give up. I'm here. #Metoo

Others still found that there wasn't enough room within Twitter's platform to adequately share their stories:

> #MeToo Too many instances for 140 characters
>
> The number of times I can fit #MeToo into 140 characters, or even 280, won't come close to the number of times I have been touched by strange men.

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[3] Each of the tweets used in this chapter was gathered in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (2012).

Within these tweets, none of the users explicitly declared their particular motivations for describing their experiences of sexual harassment, assault, or rape. Indeed, Milano's initial tweet did not ask women to describe their experiences: instead, it simply asked them to write 'me too' as a status update. This therefore leads to the question of why users felt compelled to share their stories, rather than simply posting the #MeToo hashtag alongside Milano's initial tweet.

However, the sharing of these stories can be framed as a crucial element of consciousness-raising groups. Previous accounts of second- and third-wave consciousness-raising practices make specific mention of the recounting of personal experiences; indeed, Sarachild (1968) labels them the recollection and sharing of 'bitter experiences'. The Red Stockings Collective argues that the sharing of personal testimonies was an essential step in consciousness-raising groups and that this allowed women to 'relate to one another and generalize experiences' (Sowards & Renegar, 2004, p. 535). Without the disclosure of collective narratives—those that were thought to be 'personal deficiencies and individual problems' (Campbell, 1999, p. 128)—consciousness cannot be raised. It is, as Dubriwny (2005, p. 396) argues, the situation in which 'individual experiences make possible a reframing of one's understanding of the world'. The need to hear other stories is articulated by others within the tweets examined for this research:

Always tell your story: you never know who may need to hear it. #MeToo

It breaks my heart, but it also warms my heart. I grew up in a time when #MeToo was outlawed. We are all shouting it at once, and that's progress

Hearing stories from other courageous women has made my decision to speak up so much easier, and made me feel SO MUCH less alone #MeToo

We can't let them silence us. Speak your truth even if your voice shakes and in moments of doubt, remember that you're not alone. #MeToo

You're not alone, and despite what you've been told, you'll never be alone. Listening to them isolates you but speaking empowers you. #MeToo

To all survivors of sexual violence: shame belongs to the perpetrator and not to you. Please remember that you are not alone. #MeToo

For these users, the decision to share their stories was prompted by hearing others' experiences. Indeed, the last tweet of these three specifically identifies that her experience was made 'easier' by hearing from others first.

During consciousness-raising meet ups in second-wave feminism, when one woman shared her lived experience of everyday sexism or disclosed her abuse, she was often met with a chorus of women sharing similar stories (Bruley, 2013). Although these women were not punctuating their stories with a hashtag, they were still declaring 'me too'. Vulnerability encourages others to be vulnerable with us: it invites others in to sit with us in our pain, discomfort, or confusion (Brown, 2007). It gives those who bear witness to our stories permission to share theirs, and when our stories are met with a resounding 'me too', it qualifies our experience and raises consciousness.

There is an element of safety and accountability in face-to-face consciousness-raising groups that cannot be recreated online. When we move consciousness-raising online, we accept that our stories may no longer be private, nor ephemeral, and that our performance is open for a mixed audience. Depending on the affordances of the platform we use for consciousness-raising, at any time someone could screen shot our words or react in an aggressive manner. However, by tagging our posts on Twitter with #MeToo, a person is not the first to share their story: they are both comforted and protected by the words of others. Every time a person uses the #MeToo hashtag, they in turn make it easier for others to share their stories and feel less alone. This solidarity creates a sense of safety for women to share their stories, and it is the knowledge that they are not alone that reassures and (potentially) empowers them.

A common response within the tweets discussed within this chapter was that of empathy, support, and advice: both for survivors specifically and the public more broadly. Although direct responses to tweets were not analysed for this research, a number of tweets captured pointed to specific resources and links for both survivors and the general public more broadly:

It's powerful to see so many come forward and share their #MeToo experiences of sexual assault and harassment. This is a thread[4] of key resources.

Dudes! In the wake of #MeToo you will be hearing things that should horrify you. DON'T ask survivors for next steps.

Dear survivors—there [are] so many posts online about #MeToo—please do take care, and tune out if need be. You are important.

Bearing in mind that each of the above tweets (alongside others that fell into this category) were what Twitter had deemed to be 'popular', their resultant reach can be understood to be reasonably broad. Although the people who shared their stories using the #MeToo hashtag may not have done so in order to visibly and knowingly employ a form of consciousness-raising, their actions nonetheless fall into line with these broader practices. Our analyses of these tweets points to a wider need to share stories and unite experiences. Further tweets then reinforce the importance and impact that the disclosure of experiences has had on the user and how this has in turn led them to share their own stories. In framing these tweets as a form of consciousness-raising, we can also see evidence of impacts of this process. The *raising* of consciousness itself requires, as Eisenstein (2001) points out, a personal change. And it is this personal change that is often followed by the next step of consciousness-raising: how individuals can resist oppression through further actions (Sowards & Renegar, 2004).

Concluding Thoughts

In concluding the previous section with Sowards and Renegar's thoughts on *action* as a further resistance (2004), we are left with the question of 'what next?' This is despite any signs that the #MeToo movement is slowing down: indeed, one year on, since Alyssa Milano's tweet sent #MeToo viral and over a decade since Tarana Burke first started to use 'me too' to raise our consciousness on sexual assault and abuse, it is *still* relevant.

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[4] A 'thread' on Twitter has been defined by the platform as 'a series of connected Tweets from one person…[designed to] provide additional context, an update, or an extended point' (Twitter, 2018b).

Perhaps somewhat idealistically, we hope that there is a time 'beyond' #MeToo—that women, alongside other oppressed people, are consistently and continuously encouraged and supported to speak up and speak out. In envisioning social media spaces as a type of stage, and the telling of these stories as a performance, we must also ask how we can best invite the audience in, to bear witness, and how both we, as the audience, can then continue to enact change. How do we move from telling our past to speaking our future? We suggest that in further shifting the #MeToo discussion from what our stories were, to what our stories can be, we can continue to highlight intersecting oppressions and further our understandings of how change is both highly diverse and highly contextual. By using the same platforms that we have currently facilitated to further debate and discuss our future stories perhaps we can take the next step towards a more effective, more powerful, performance.

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