

## INTRODUCTION

- In 2006, Tarana Burke first coined the term “me too” as the name for her movement after speaking with a 13-year old sexual assault victim.
- Although a victim herself, Burke was afraid to say “me too” after she heard the girl’s story; she instead sent her to talk to someone else, only to never see her again.
- She recognized that what helped her through her recovery was finding women that could empathize with her and felt guilty for turning the young girl away so quickly (Ohlheiser, “Meet”).
- She hoped to change the negative stigma that surrounded sexual abuse and liberate women from the chains that kept them silent. Burke called this idea “**empowerment through empathy**” (Ohlheiser, “Meet”).
- On October 15, 2017, Alyssa Milano encouraged victims of sexual abuse to say “me too” alongside her (see fig.1). Overnight, her “tweet” prompted “55,000 replies... [ ], which resulted in] the hashtag trending No. 1 on Twitter” (Sayej, “Alyssa”).
- I chose this research topic because I was intrigued by the prevalence that this hashtag had on the MeToo movement, and how greater awareness for sexual violence has developed across the world through this movement.



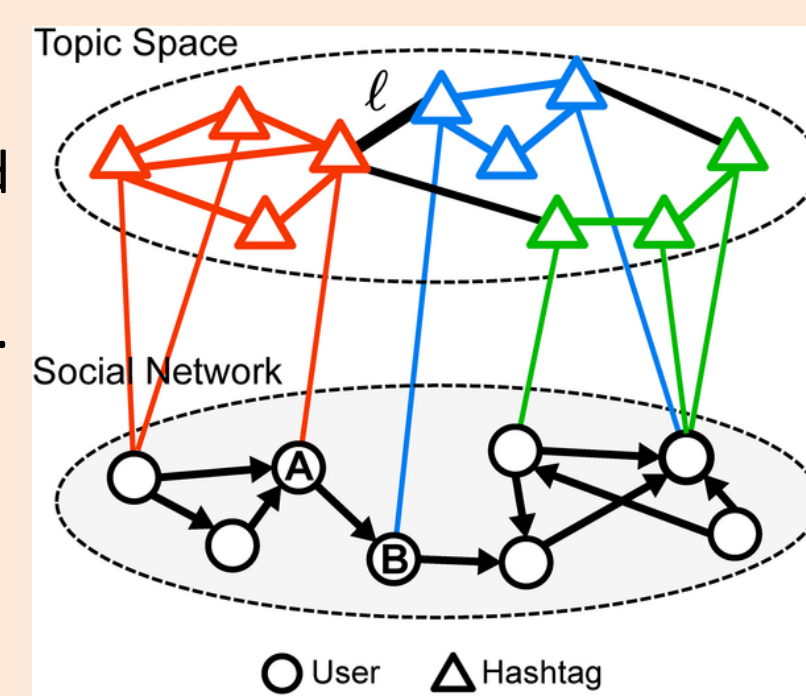
**Fig. 1.** The tweet from Alyssa Milano that revolutionized the Me Too movement on social media platforms from Sayej, Nadja; The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 1 Dec. 2017, [www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/dec/01/alyssa-milano-mee-too-sexual-harassment-abuse](http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/dec/01/alyssa-milano-mee-too-sexual-harassment-abuse).

## RESEARCH QUESTION

- To what extent has the #MeToo movement on social media reformed the policies regarding sexual abuse?
- Additional Questions**
- How does a hashtag create certain relationships within society?
  - How do hashtags allow for the public to get more involved in acting on societal issues?
  - How many stories must be told for an accusation to be believed?

## THESIS STATEMENT/HYPOTHESIS

- This paper looks to further investigate the questions discussed above through the lens of the #MeToo movement, and how the use of the hashtag transformed the original campaign created by Tarana Burke in 2006.
- Thesis Statement:** Through the use of the hashtag and its formation of specific communities, the #MeToo movement escalated societal awareness to the point that finally implemented systemic change for sexual abuse.



**Fig. 3.** A visual representation of the relationship between hashtags and an online user on a social media platform from Lilian Weng and Filippo Menczer; *PLOS ONE*, Public Library of Science, 24 Feb. 2015, [journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0118410#sec015](http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0118410#sec015).

**Fig. 2.** A graph of the number of tweets that Social Movement Organizations posted and retweeted during the #MeToo movement, starting from Alyssa Milano’s first tweet in October 2017 to the MeToo movement conversation at the Golden Globes in January 2018 from Ying Xiong et al.; *Public Relations Review*, vol. 45, no. 1, Mar. 2019, pp. 10–23., doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2018.10.014.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### A Resounding Silence

- The delegitimization of a victim’s story could be due to a perpetrator’s reputation. It becomes challenging for a woman to discredit an abuser who has an official status in society, or one who the public cannot perceive as committing these heinous crimes.
- Victims can be forcefully silenced through Non-Disclosure Agreements. In this contract, women accept money in agreement to keep the deal and the incident a secret from the public (Prasad 2508). Victims feel more alone when tied to these contracts, trapped in a world where they are the only ones that know the real story.

### #HowItWorks

- The hashtag is the primary tool that was used to transform the MeToo movement onto a social media platform. These hashtags work to incorporate the public by grabbing their attention through the concept of “highlighting,” as well as connecting them to a unique virtual community where the users have a similar interest.

### #MeToo

- Using the words “Me Too” as the platform for this message allows for other women to join in and share their experiences, creating a stronger message and spreading greater awareness to end sexual violence.

### Impactful Relationships

- Using diverse hashtags and a tactic known as **hashtag activism**, topic-organization and organization-public relationships can be formed.

### Silence Breakers

- Medical schools and sports are two prominent examples of systems that have reformed issues regarding sexual abuse through the #MeToo movement. Victims, also known as the “Silence Breakers,” being named as the “Person of the Year” in 2017 by Times Magazine illustrates just how influential these women have been through this movement.

## MAIN CASE STUDIES

### Chanel Miller vs. Brock Turner

- Chanel Miller tried to explain her terrifying experience of almost being raped by Brock Turner one night during a party. However, the prosecution claimed that Turner did not deserve a long sentence because “a harsher sentence would have a ‘severe impact’ on Turner, a star swimmer who could have made it to the Olympics” (Koren, “Telling”). He only received a 6-month sentence.

### Harvey Weinstein and Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs)

- In a specific case against Weinstein, the victim’s lawyers suggested that she stay silent through an NDA due to the lack of support she would receive if she tried to speak out against Weinstein (Prasad 2518).

### Medical Schools and Sexual Abuse

- Today, medical faculty have pushed for new educational and training programs to ensure that all faculty are aware of what sexual abuse is and the importance of reporting it. The National Science Foundation has also put new reporting requirements in place for sexual violence in the workplace (Antman 1760).

### Larry Nassar and USA Gymnastics

- McKayla Maroney brings national attention to Nassar’s abuse using the #MeToo hashtag in 2017. With over 150 women accusing him of abuse, Nassar was sentenced to prison for sexual abuse and for child pornography (North, “Young”).

### TIME Magazine and their “Person of the Year”

- The magazine published this yearly article in 2017 and named “The Silence Breakers” as their chosen people of the year (see fig.4). This group consisted of multiple women who have spoken out about sexual abuse with the #MeToo movement by sharing their personal stories.



**Fig. 4.** The front cover of the Time magazine’s “Person of the Year,” awarded to the “Silence Breakers” in 2017 from Stephanie Zacharek et al.; *Time*, Time, Dec. 2017, [time.com/time-person-of-the-year-2017-silence-breakers/](http://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-2017-silence-breakers/).

## RESEARCH PROBLEMS

- When deciding on a topic, I originally was inspired by professional runners and the story of Mary Cain and abuse she endured by her coaches at Nike. From there, I wanted to look more into mental illness in professional runners but was unable to obtain sufficient research to support my research question.
- I then began exploring other professional sports and landed upon the USA Gymnastics organization and the accusations against Larry Nassar.
- This case study then led me to the #MeToo movement, and I decided to use this movement as the foundation for my research question and paper.

## MAIN CONCLUSIONS

- Since its initial development in 2006, it is clear that the #MeToo movement rose in popularity after the addition of the hashtag in 2017.
- The hashtag created a virtual community of silence breakers, where millions of victims could share their stories online.
- While society is now implementing change, there are still cases of sexual assault that have to be recognized, as well as reforms that the public needs to put into action.
- A few states, such as California and New Jersey, have banned the use of NDAs in circumstances regarding sexual assault and harassment (Prasad 2522; Quinn and Miceli, “Silenced Voices”). Working to eliminate the use of NDAs in all states is a possible route that can implemented to decrease the rates of illegitimacy and ignorance toward instances of sexual harassment or assault.
- Further work also needs to be done to recognize the victims who cannot use the hashtag #MeToo online.
- This movement can only continue to grow to help women say the words that Tarana Burke was afraid to speak in her first conversation with a victim: “me too.”

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