15. Disclosure & Disruption: How Algorithms and Psychology Shaped the #MeToo Movement

-Aditi Gupta

Abstract

The #MeToo movement was a defining instance of online feminist activism. How did algorithmic design intertwine with psychological phenomena to shape the movement's visibility and impact? This paper interrogates the digital and psychological dynamics of the #MeToo Movement employing a conceptual and qualitative synthesis of existing research. Drawing on concepts such as filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011), confirmation bias, and emotional arousal in virality (Berger & Milkman, 2012), the paper examines how social media provided survivors with a platform for collective disclosure and solidarity while simultaneously reinforcing polarised narratives. It further investigates how algorithm-driven platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter) amplified emotionally charged content, thereby both empowering and retraumatizing survivors through metrics of affinity, engagement, and recency. Juxtaposing the movement's creation of a politics of visibility with the dangers of algorithmic curation, the paper highlights how digital infrastructures shape public discourse. By analysing network-related reciprocal disclosure (Gallagher et al., 2019) and partisan backlash such as #HimToo, this work frames #MeToo as both: a breakthrough in digital feminist solidarity and a cautionary tale about the psychological and technological infrastructure that governs contemporary online activism.

Keywords

- MeToo Movement
- Activism
- Psychology
- Algorithm
- Filter Bubbles
- Confirmation
- Bias
- HimToo

The #MeToo Movement

"And when that new day finally dawns, it will be because of a lot of magnificent women… fighting hard to make sure that they become the leaders who take us to the time when nobody ever has to say 'Me too' again."

History is shaped by tipping points— moments when the unspeakable becomes

undeniable. #MeToo was one of them. Beneath its explosive rise lay a hidden architecture: social media algorithms that amplified marginalized voices, psychological mechanisms that turned perceived shame into online solidarity, and a disruptive force so potent it rewrote the rules of accountability. This is how a hashtag became a revolution. The quote borrowed from Oprah Winfrey's Golden Globes speech in 2018 highlights how survivors of sexual assault worldwide decided to take matters into their own hands.

The phrase "Me Too" was first used on the Myspace social network by Tarana Burke in 2006, as a part of the campaign to promote 'empowerment through empathy' among women of colour who have experienced sexual abuse, particularly within underprivileged communities. She was inspired to use the phrase after being unable to respond to a thirteen-year-old girl who confided to her that she had been sexually assaulted. Burke later wished she had simply told the girl, "Me too."

Eleven years later, it was popularised by Alyssa Milano, one of the activists and actresses who accused Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein of sexual assault. While Burke's phrase laid the groundwork, its transformation into a global phenomenon required more than activist intent; it needed algorithmic amplification. She tweeted, "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet."

(Milano, 2017, X)

The phrase had been used more than 2,00,000 times by the end of the day and tweeted more than 5,00,00 times by the next day. On Facebook, the hashtag was used by more than 4.7 million people in 12 million posts during the first 24 hours. The platform reported that 45% of users in the US had a friend who had posted using the term. According to X (formerly Twitter), 1.7 million tweets with the hashtag were recorded in the next ten days. Eighty-five countries reportedly had over a thousand tweets posted on the hashtag. Sexual assault as a topic of discussion remains stigmatised. Yet, a large number of people, especially but not exclusively women,

around the globe started actively engaging in this public discourse.

The Algorithmic Design

It is important to note why and how this particular phrase started trending or became a 'media hype.' In 2016, Facebook had 1.55 billion active users who spent at least twenty minutes every day reading the news on their feed. Social media giants such as Facebook, X, WhatsApp, Snapchat, or Instagram act as places where breaking news, media hypes and whispering campaigns are implemented.

With numerous stories floating every day, Facebook and X place their limitations and restrictions on a piece of content that the particular user will be most interested in. This is enabled through the algorithmic design. It is capable of forming divisive groups and manipulating their reality through reinforcement. Facebook argues that without the algorithm, an average user would see 1,500 to 15,000 stories in their feed. With the growing amount of content pouring in, algorithms must filter the stories. This cuts down to the 300 most relevant stories instead.

Now, how does the algorithm determine what the user would be most interested in? It is dependent on many factors, namely:

- affinity: it measures the interaction between the user and the provider of content;
- weight: the weight factor measures the engagement, judging by the number of likes, shares, common photos, tags, and events;
- decay: the delay between when a post was published and the user's last login is measured.

Other indicators are: the type of content, potential for mass likes, user interest, content quality, connection speed, and/or how long the user stopped scrolling through the newsfeed to watch a post, even if they do not click the link to it (Allfacebook, 2016). An average organic post reaches about sixteen per cent of its users, considering the interplay of these elements (HubSpot, 2016).

All of these factors played a major role in how these numbers were achieved for the #MeToo movement. Evidently, the social media algorithm and its user cannot be viewed in isolation. The user decides how newsworthy or shareworthy a piece of content is in their newsfeed. Shareability makes the content go viral and creates media hype around a topic.

Think of why you would share a post. Is it relatable? Does it evoke an emotion? Is it educational, or does it have all of these qualities?

Mediation Of Trauma Narratives

Virality is partially driven by physiological arousal. Content that evokes high-arousal emotions, whether positive or negative, is more likely to go viral. Sexual assault is among the issues eliciting intense and complex emotional responses.

Stigmatisation of the subject of sexual harassment acts as a tool of control to instil fear in the minds of survivors. According to Alaggia (2005), the survivors' feelings of responsibility and experiencing victim-blaming, judgment, or dismissal make them apprehensive of discussing the incident. In a qualitative study by Strauss and colleagues, survivors mentioned "being triggered, being inundated with media coverage and public narratives about sexual assault, burning out, and feeling disillusioned and frustrated" when asked about their initial reactions and challenges upon seeing the anti-sexual assault activism trend.

Hence, strengthening the proposition that high-arousal emotions have a role to play in virality. The crux of the movement was the self-disclosure by survivors. It frequently prioritised the "who," "what," "where," "when," "why," and "how" of personal trauma experiences for disclosure. Gallagher et al. (2019) analysed more than 1.8 million #MeToo tweets and found evidence for a network-related reciprocal disclosure. This meant that when a survivor self-disclosed, there were subsequently more disclosures from their followers. A ripple effect, where one voice emboldened many. In this way, the internet served not only as a megaphone but as a connective tissue between survivors, uniting strangers through the shared experience of sexual harassment and assault.

Yet, the movement's digital momentum was not solely the result of raw human connection. Behind every viral post or trending hashtag was an unseen set of algorithmic decisions, quietly curating what content reached whom, and when. This brings us to a deeper examination of how algorithms influence not only visibility but perception of reality. The same platforms that enabled mass disclosure also quietly filtered and amplified content according to opaque, algorithmic priorities. Users are often unaware that their reality is being manipulated. One cannot see the algorithms actively working, grant permissions to their mechanisms, nor see what they filter.

Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers and Polarisation

Eli Pariser (2011), in his book 'The Filter Bubble: What The Internet Is Hiding From You' describes a phenomenon known as the "filter bubble." He argues that users always consume media based on their interests. Unfortunately, most consumers are uninformed of the three dynamics brought by the algorithm:

1. Each user has their own filter bubble according to their specific preferences, leading to a decisive separation amongst people.

2. The metrics which create the 'filter bubble' are invisible, inaccessible and opaque to the public. This makes us believe what we are seeing on Facebook/X/Instagram is exactly what everybody else is also seeing.
3. Thus, no one consents to enter the filter bubble. Personalised and relevant filters approach the consumer without active consent.

According to Pariser (2011), it is difficult to recognise how biased the notion of 'filter bubble' is while being in it. The filter bubble reinforces group dynamics on social media as confirmation bias is further perpetuated. Users tend to be a part of groups with which they agree and it segregates them from others without leaving a space for them to discuss their own biases.

Additionally, the social media algorithm builds upon these dynamics. Del Vicario et al. (2015) conducted a study that proved that exposure to selective content leads to the formation of homogeneous echo chambers. These echo chambers of like-minded people who agree with each other provide a breeding ground for the spreading of certain pieces of information, ultimately creating media hypes.

Another key driver for the sharing of content, besides homogeneity, is polarisation. Seeing the world in either black or white evokes intense emotions, which again plays an instrumental role in reinforcing media hypes. People more willingly share content which aligns with their pre-existing beliefs. Algorithms driven by metrics encourage the user to read and solely discuss opinions they agree with. This content is shared with like-minded peers in their cluster, who again evidently will 'like' or share the content that originates from this cluster. They are being ignorant of the rest, but not willingly.

#HimToo Movement

Yet for every algorithm that unites survivors, another sows division. This manifests clearly in the ideological chasm between #MeToo and #HimToo. The latter was a short-lived backlash to the movement, which aimed to support male victims of sexual assault and against false rape allegations. #HimToo became popular during the Brett Kavanaugh hearings. He was nominated in 2018 by President Donald Trump for Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States of America. Later, it came to light that Christine Blasey Ford, Deborah Ramirez and Julie Swetnick had accused him of sexual misconduct. The supporters of Donald Trump's nomination used the hashtag to largely portray men who were accused of sexual assault as victims of false allegations. This iteration of the hashtag is indicative of "popular misogyny" since this discourse of men's rights emerges because of men's injuries solely within a feminist context (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019).

The algorithm plays a role in how the perception of the two differs. It personalises a

filter bubble only for you, which you are not aware of. Say, your friend shares a story which contains #HimToo, and you are interested in the things your friend regards as shareworthy. You might stop browsing to read the title or 'like' the post as it is in concurrence with your belief. The algorithm takes note of this reaction and is driven by the metrics to filter similar content for you. You will find more individuals who share the same views. More headlines will report cases that support the world you picture and fewer that do not. This leads to confirmation bias. Outlets that have a different agenda than your filter bubble are not reported, even though they might be what the media is currently discussing.

This is how our social media and perception differ from others, and leads to polarisation. We start to think of the world in two extremes. Similarly, this example could be viewed from the standpoint of advocates of #MeToo. This is more damaging than an unknown online audience can completely fathom.

As Pariser argues, being in a filter bubble leads to the extinguishment of democracy. Not only are we unable to see others' point of view, but also get more enclosed in our own (bubble). We are being offered parallel and separate schools of thought without having an option to rely on shared facts. The political divide between #HimToo and #MeToo supporters demonstrates how the interplay of filter bubbles, confirmation bias leading to echo chambers, and deliberate dichotomy plays out. Hence, digital algorithms reinforce misinformation. If it continues to not report opposing views and only feeds the filter bubble, there may be no way out of the echo chamber. In fact, it might be expanded.

Conclusion

The #MeToo movement evolved within a digital ecosystem designed for glueing eyeballs. In doing so, it revealed the ethical fragility of algorithm-driven activism. What began as Tarana Burke's grassroots mantra became a global reckoning not only against perpetrators of sexual violence but also against the technological and psychological systems that determine whose pain is amplified. This paper set out to examine how algorithmic design, emotional arousal, and cognitive biases shape online feminist mobilisation; the trajectory of #MeToo demonstrates precisely how these forces converged. Confirmation bias in custom-made filter bubbles, dopamine-fueled engagement with high-arousal content, and the catharsis of networked reciprocal disclosure were subtly weaponised by platforms that prioritise attention over balance.

It must be noted that this analysis is limited by its reliance on secondary literature. Future research might employ qualitative interviews, digital ethnography, or computational analysis of platform behaviour to robustly demonstrate how algorithmic infrastructures interact with the psychological mechanisms driving collective action.

Such work is essential if we are to develop technologies that protect the integrity of online activism while mitigating polarisation, retraumatisation, and misinformation.

In a world of nuance, social media architectures continue to push users toward increasingly binary viewpoints—an outcome that is not incidental but structurally embedded. If we are to harness the power of digital movements for lasting social change, we must move beyond surface-level engagement. Demand transparency, equity, and accountability not only from institutions but from the platforms that shape contemporary public discourse. In an era where attention is monetised and truth is filtered, reclaiming our narratives begins with reclaiming our awareness. If algorithms control our revolutions, we must ask: who controls the algorithms?

References

Andrea, A. (2017, November 21). #MeToo reaches 85 countries with 1.7M tweets. CBS News. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/metoo-reaches-85-countries-with-1-7-million-tweets/

Anitha, S. (2020). From #MeToo to #HimToo in Academia. Collaborating for Change, 47–72. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190071820.003.0003

Anderson, M., Toor, S., Rainie, L., & Smith, A. (2018, July 11). Activism in the Social Media Age. Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech.

Asur, S. (2011, February 7). Trends in Social Media: Persistence and Decay. ArXiv.Org. 32 https://arxiv.org/abs/1102.1402

Berger, J. (2012). What makes online content viral? Strategic Direction, 28(8). https://doi.org/10.1108/sd.2012.05628haa.014

Boyle, K., & Rathnayake, C. (2019). #HimToo and the networking of misogyny in the age of #MeToo. Feminist Media Studies, 20(8), 1259–1277. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1661868

Ciampaglia, G. F. L. M. (2018, June 21). *Biases Make People Vulnerable to Misinformation Spread by Social Media*. Scientific American.

Dejmanee, T., Zaher, Z., Rouech, S., & Papa, M. J. (2020). #MeToo; #HimToo: Popular Feminism and Hashtag Activism in the Kavanaugh Hearings. International Journal of Communication, 14, 3946–3963.
https://opus.lib.uts.edu.au/bitstream/10453/148382/2/13696-47333-1-PB.pdf

Delker, B. C., Salton, R., McLean, K. C., & Syed, M. (2020). Who has to tell their trauma story and how hard will it be? Influence of cultural stigma and narrative redemption on the storying of sexual violence. PLOS ONE, 15(6), e0234201. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0234201

The "Dumb Right" Fabricates the "#himtoo Movement." (2018, September 27). [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tTYVnWzk7gM

Duramy, B. (2020). #MeToo and the Pursuit of Women's International Human Rights. 34 University of San Francisco Law Review, 54(2), 215–268. https://digitalcommons.law.ggu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1870&context=pubs

Explained: The algorithms that run Facebook. The Economic Times. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/trendspotting/explained-the-algorithms-that run-facebook/articleshow/87282136.cms

The Evolution of Social Media: How Did It Begin and Where Could It Go Next? (2021, March 3). Maryville Online. https://online.maryville.edu/blog/evolution-social-media/

Flynn, M. (2018, October 9). 'This is MY son': Navy vet horrified as mom's tweet miscasts him as #HimToo poster boy — and goes viral. Washington Post.

Globes, G. [Golden Globes]. (2018, January 7). Oprah Winfrey Receives the Cecil B. deMille Award - Golden Globes 2018 [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyBims8OkSY&feature=youtu.be

Greijdanus, H., de Matos Fernandes, C. A., Turner-Zwinkels, F., Honari, A., Roos, C. A., Rosenbusch, H., & Postmes, T. (2020). The psychology of online activism and social movements: relations between online and offline collective action. Current Opinion in Psychology, 35, 49–54. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.03.003

Hansen, L. K., Arvidsson, A., Nielsen, F. A., Colleoni, E., & Etter, M. (2011). Good Friends, Bad News - Affect and Virality in Twitter. Communications in Computer and Information Science, 34–43. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-22309-9_5

Harvard Business Review Magazine. (2021, August 27). The #MeToo Backlash. Harvard Business Review. https://hbr.org/2019/09/the-metoo-backlash

Hunt, & McKelvey. (2019). Algorithmic Regulation in Media and Cultural Policy: A Framework to Evaluate Barriers to Accountability. Journal of Information Policy, 9, 307. https://doi.org/10.5325/jinfopoli.9.2019.0307

LEANNE ITALIE, Associated Press. (2017, October 17). Me Too: Alyssa Milano elevates Harvey Weinstein conversation. *https://www.whsv.com*. https://www.whsv.com/content/news/Me-Too-Alyssa-Milano-elevates-Harvey-Weinstein-conversation-451297233.html

Masciantonio, A., Schumann, S., & Bourguignon, D. (2021a). Sexual and gender-based violence: To tweet or not to tweet? Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace, 15(3). https://doi.org/10.5817/cp2021-3-4

Mendes, K., Ringrose, J., & Keller, J. (2018). #MeToo and the promise and pitfalls of challenging rape culture through digital feminist activism. European Journal of Women's Studies, 25(2), 236–246. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506818765318

Morris, A. (2018, October 11). #HimToo: Left And Right Embrace Opposing Takes On Same Hashtag. NPR. https://www.npr.org/2018/10/11/656293787/-himtoo-left-and-right embrace-opposing-takes-on-same-hashtag

Noordeh, E., Levin, R., Jiang, R., & Shadmany, H. (in press). Echo Chambers in Collaborative Filtering Based Recommendation Systems
Pariser, E. (2011). The Filter Bubble. Adfo Books.

Park, A. (2017, October 24). #MeToo reaches 85 countries with 1.7M tweets. CBS News. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/metoo-reaches-85-countries-with-1-7-million-tweets/

Roese, V. (2018). You won't believe how co-dependent they are. From Media Hype to Twitter 42 Storm, 313–332. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt21215m0.19

Sastry, M. (2019, May 21). What Does #MenToo Mean In A World Where Women's Stories Are Still Dismissed? Feminism In India. https://feminisminindia.com/2019/05/21/men-too women-stories/

Sood, S. (2019, October 12). One year after India's big #MeToo wave, a reality check. ThePrint.https://theprint.in/features/one-year-after-india-big-metoo-wave-reality-check/304787/

Strauss Swanson, C., & Szymanski, D. M. (2020). From pain to power: An exploration of activism, the #Metoo movement, and healing from sexual assault trauma. Journal of Counseling Psychology, 67(6), 653–668. https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000429

Zhang, Z. (2019). From media hype to twitter storm: news explosions and their impact on issues, crises and public opinion. Critical Studies in Media Communication, 36(4), 407–410. https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2019.1593479

About the Author

Ms Aditi Gupta has completed a double bachelor's from Sophia College for Women (Empowered Autonomous), majoring in Psychology with an additional major in English Literature and History. Her academic pursuits sit at the intersection of these disciplines, grounded in a deep fascination with behavioural science and its applications. The initial development of this paper took place during her time as a member of Sophia's Excellence in Arts Programme, for which she was rewarded the K.C. Mahindra Scholarship for obtaining the highest grade in Phase I. Ms Gupta aims to contribute to contemporary debates in technology, particularly artificial intelligence, as well as feminist and queer discourse, drawing on an interdisciplinary approach.

Acknowledgement

Guided by Ms. Ahana Sharma, a mental health professional, educator, and trainer specialising in academic quality and facilitation. Ms. Sharma currently works as a Senior Associate focusing on enhancing education delivery, online facilitation, and mentoring for international university partners. She holds a Master's degree in Counselling Psychology and brings extensive experience in therapeutic practice and psychology education, having previously served as a lecturer of Psychology. Ms Sharma has also been a TEDxAMS speaker, addressing the topic "The Mental Health Crisis During COVID-19." Additionally, she has pursued specialised study in gender-based issues, completing an Honours course on Gender-Based Violence from Johns Hopkins University.