Mapping #MeToo:

A synthesis review of digital feminist research across social media platforms

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# Abstract 13

In October 2017, a tweet by Hollywood actress Alyssa Milano using Tarana Burke’s phrase MeToo as a hashtag sparked a global movement. Despite the immense media attention #MeToo has garnered, not much is known about how scholars have studied the movement. Through a synthesis review covering sources from 2006 to 2019, we learned that there are only 22 studies that have examined participation on social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit. We conclude that more research needs to be conducted and there is a gap in qualitative studies that directly engage participating individuals to learn about their experiences. While #MeToo is a global movement, the omission of any reference to geography or a lack of geographic diversity suggests a narrow focus on scholarship based in the Global North. There is a need for more cross-cultural analysis to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the movement as it evolves over time and moves into different spaces.

# Keywords: #MeToo, digital activism, sexual violence, social media, synthesis review, social affordance, Twitter, Tumblr, Reddit, Facebook.

# Introduction

Initially used in 2006 by African-American activist Tarana Burke to raise awareness of sexual violence offline, particularly among Black girls and women, the phrase “Me Too” went viral a decade later when Hollywood actress Alyssa Milano encouraged others on Twitter to share their own experiences of sexual violence. Within the first 24 hours, the hashtag MeToo was used 12 million times (CBS, 2017).

That #MeToo has been, and continues to be, a global movement is evident in data derived from the ‘Me Too Rising’ project, launched by Google Trends in April 2018 to mark Sexual Assault Awareness Month (Me Too Rising, 2018). Visualizing data from Google searches across the world, and updated daily, the project demonstrates how, since its inception, people in every country have searched for ‘Me Too’ (Me Too Rising, 2018). Although just one example, this project demonstrates the continued relevance, pervasiveness, and spread of the #MeToo movement over time and space. Indeed, three years after the movement emerged on Twitter, #MeToo continues to make international headlines. Whether it is the spread of #MeToo to new and perhaps surprising places (Garibotti and Hopp, 2019), how #MeToo has sparked changes in sex education (Landman, 2019) or legislation (Daniels, 2018), or the high-profile people who have come forward with their #MeToo stories (John, 2017), it certainly has a significant legacy.

Despite significant attention to #MeToo in the media and in political debate, we know surprisingly little about the current state of knowledge regarding what research has been done on the movement. There is little understanding of how scholars have approached the study of a movement that is spread across multiple social media platforms. We also know little about what methods scholars have employed in their investigations of #MeToo, a movement that is simultaneously community-oriented with high solidarity, while also being public and open to scrutiny. Given the movement’s global significance for highlighting the pervasiveness of sexual violence, we ask the following research questions:

1. What research questions are scholars investigating about the movement?
2. How are scholars studying the movement?
3. What is the geographical focus of #MeToo research? Is it global like the movement itself, or local, focusing on context and culture?

The present study contributes to our understanding of #MeToo by mapping what we know about it to date, how this research was conducted, and what was learned. Through this synthesis review we identify key research that examines participation in #MeToo on social media platforms such as Twitter, Tumblr, Reddit, and Facebook. This review contributes to the literature by outlining key recurrent topics across studies on #MeToo. It also makes a methodological contribution to (feminist) media scholarship by outlining the range of quantitative, critical, qualitative, and mixed methods approaches employed in this area. Central to the methodological contribution is the finding that, while #MeToo is a digital movement in the sense that it uses digital platforms to “dialogue, network, organise and challenge” (Mendes et al. 2019, p 2) attitudes, organisations and institutions that fail to respond adequately to sexual violence and harassment, it requires a cross-platform approach that also calls for direct interaction with participants and nonparticipants of the movement in order to learn about their personal histories, contexts, cultural backgrounds, and unique experiences (see for example Hansson et al., 2019). This synthesis review also serves as a means to identify gaps in the literature and to point toward best practices as well as key areas for future research.

# Literature Review

For many decades prior to the emergence of #MeToo in 2017, scholars have demonstrated the media’s longstanding interest not only in stories of sexual violence (Carter, 1998), but in survivors speaking out about their experiences (Serisier, 2018). In her book *Speaking Out*, Serisier traced this popularization of speaking out in Anglophone and Western parts of the world. As she argued, those who speak out do so with the belief that it will end sexual violence. While prominent second-wave feminists are often credited with ‘enabling new modes of telling, understanding, hearing and reading women’s accounts of rape’ (Serisier, 2018: 8), Serisier demonstrated how Black women, for example, have been speaking publicly and politically about rape since at least the 1800s (see Jacobs, 2000, cited in Serisier, 2018: 9). Serisier, then, is one of many scholars who document how those who are most marginalized and oppressed have long had their experiences of sexual violence written out of the public record, excluded, or ignored (see also Latina and Docherty, 2014; Salter, 2013).

Serisier’s work also demonstrates how ‘speaking out’ and ‘breaking the silence’ are not new practices. Instead, this work, among others, evidences how the media, including news, literature, television, film, and gaming, have long played a significant role in shaping both what and how the public comes to know about sexual violence (Atkinson and Rodgers, 2016; Cuklanz, 2000; Horeck, 2004; Moorti, 2002). While the mainstream media has long been a key space in which rape is defined (see Horeck, 2004; Kitzinger, 2009), as technologies and modes of communication have developed, we are seeing new ways in which the public come to know about and understand sexual violence (Loney-Howes 2020; Mendes et al. 2018b). Unfortunately, the media is also a key player in perpetuating rape myths – or false beliefs about rape such as who commits it, why, and where, and who is likely to be a victim (Burt, 1980). Because the mainstream media has historically represented only the most extraordinary cases of sexual violence (often committed by strangers and involving violence), which are nonrepresentative of most people’s experiences (Carter, 1998), many have turned to digital technologies to curate victim-centered narratives which counter normative media representations (see Loney-Howes, 2020; Mendes & Ringrose, 2019).

Indeed, the relationship between online spaces and gendered violence is both complex and ever evolving. While a deep investigation is beyond the scope of this paper, there exists a large body of scholarship exploring new forms of gendered violence which digital technologies enable (see Eckert, 2018; Massanari, 2017; Vickery and Everbach, 2018). More relevant however, is the growing body of work which explores how survivors and allies harness these technologies to challenge sexual violence (see Fileborn and Loney-Howes, 2019). Scholars for example, have documented the rise of various digital feminist campaigns and feminist hashtags that speak to broader issues of violence against women and rape culture on social media (e.g., Fileborn, 2019; Loney-Howes, 2018; Mendes et al., 2018b; 2019).[[1]](#footnote-1) Social media are ‘web-based services that allow individuals, communities, and organizations to collaborate, connect, interact, and build community by enabling them to create, co-create, modify, share, and engage with user-generated content that is easily accessible’ (McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase, 2016).

This is due both to the affordances of platforms (Davis, 2020) – which at times limit word count (Twitter), encourage the use of hyperlinks (Twitter), and prioritize or privilege visual imagery (Instagram, Tumblr) – and specific platform vernaculars, a ‘unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics’ (Gibbs et al., 2015) that develop within each social media platform. Affordances are defined as action possibilities created by features and functions of social media platforms; they shape how communities form and conversations take place (Davis, 2020). By looking at affordances, both opportunities and constraints are examined. While all social media share common features that afford engagement through ‘two-way’ audience interactions, the diversity of sites makes it difficult to identify a set of core features and functionalities that remain constant over time (Papacharissi, 2016). A key argument here is that architectural and social affordances mean that we ‘come to know sexual violence differently depending on the platform through which a narrative is mediated’ (Mendes et al., 2018a: 1293). In sum, our review of the literature demonstrates that a substantive body of research has emerged around the role of digital feminist campaigns and of social media and its affordances. Our review also demonstrates that little is known about what is *in* the literature in terms of the central topics, the methods that are utilized, and what challenges and best practices are emerging.

# Method

We conducted a synthesis review, which differs from more traditional narrative reviews in that it employs a replicable and transparent approach that minimizes researcher bias and includes a comprehensive and exhaustive literature search of published and unpublished studies (Tranfield et al., 2003). A key part of the systematic synthesis review is to provide an audit trail that documents decisions made, steps taken, and inclusion and exclusion criteria. The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis checklist (PRISMA) (Moher et al., 2009) guided our process. The PRISMA Statement is widely cited across disciplines as the preferred method for completing systematic reviews (Google Scholar citation count on August 18, 2020: 63,542).

We conducted our database search using the process in Figure 1. The research team selected nine databases based on their relevance to gender studies and feminist research (Gender Studies Database, Project MUSE, Communication & Mass Media Complete, LexisNexis Academic, Web of Science, JSTOR, SCOPUS, and Scholars Portal Journals). We searched broadly for books, journal articles, book chapters, and white papers. The search was limited by the relevant timeframe for #MeToo, as the phrase ‘me too’ was first used by Tarana Burke in 2006. This limited the search to the time period from January 1, 2006 to June 30, 2019, when the last search was conducted. Searches on all databases were restricted to the English language. The main keywords in English were: ‘MeToo,’ ‘#MeToo,’ and ‘hashtag MeToo.’ This search strategy produced an initial set of 988 sources. All sources were entered into a spreadsheet and given a unique identifier (ID). In the initial screening stage, 200 duplicates were removed from the spreadsheet, reducing the total number of sources to 788. To prepare our final article set, we outlined clear eligibility criteria for inclusion: published work that studied participation in #MeToo on a social media platform. All articles were reviewed to determine inclusion eligibility.

<Figure 1 about here>

After reviewing each text, we identified 22 that met the criteria (Appendix A). Most of the 788 articles identified mention the phrase #MeToo once, but do not address the topic in any depth. While our original set included articles from 2006-2019, none of the articles prior to 2018 met the inclusion criteria. We employed a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and used open and selective coding to examine the findings and conclusions of each text, excluding the introduction and literature review. After careful refinement of the codes, we identified a final list of themes.

# Themes

Table 1 shows the eight themes identified across the article set.

<Table 1 about here>

## Method used

When studying a hashtag activism like #MeToo, we expected that many researchers would rely on big data approaches. Reflecting this expectation, eight articles in our review use a quantitative approach (Manikonda et al.\_2018\_ID1, Xiong et al.\_2019\_ID2, Muhlmeyer et al.\_2019\_ID3, Khatua et al.\_2018\_ID12, Rho et al.\_2018\_ID13, Foster\_2019\_ID14, Pandey et al.\_2018\_ID15, Schneider and Carpenter\_2019\_ID19). Of these, seven rely on social media data for their primary analysis, collecting posts that include the #MeToo hashtag. Analysis strategies include Natural Language Processing (NLP) (latent topic and sentiment extraction) (Manikonda et al.\_2018\_ID1), semantic network and thematic analyses (Xiong et al.\_2019\_ID2), and content and context analysis (Schneider and Carpenter\_2019\_ID19). Common among all of the articles is the use of software that analyses and quantifies words found in posted content. For example, Xiong et al. (2018\_ID2) harvested tweets from known social movement organizations to examine how posters used words and hashtags to participate in the #MeToo movement. The authors analyzed the data using semantic network analysis and thematic analysis methods. Words that they frequently found include ‘women,’ ‘sexual harassment,’ ‘survivor,’ ‘movement,’ and ‘story.’ Employing sentiment analysis and text coding, Schneider and Carpenter (2019\_ID19) found that tweets within 24 hours of Alyssa Milano’s viral tweet had a negative tone—mostly expressing anger and sadness. The authors also detected positive social reactions in the tweets—such as validation and emotional support—and negative social reactions—such as disbelief and disruption. The big data approaches used in these studies are well-suited for studying a large number of social media comments and obtaining an overview of the conversations that constitute the #MeToo movement. While these methods were thoughtfully applied and the conclusions well-supported, they nevertheless highlight that a full understanding of the movement requires a direct engagement with its participants. Yet, only one article uses a qualitative approach (Lin and Zhang\_2019\_ID5), engaging in online participatory observation to analyse the voices of participants in the movement. This approach provides in-depth insights of participation, such as their motivations to join the movement.

 Hassan et al. (2019\_ID16) and Mendes et al. (2018\_ID22) use mixed methods approaches, combining online survey data with in-person interviews. Hassan et al. (2019\_ID16) state that the aim of the survey was to obtain an understanding of Bangladeshi women’s participation in the global #MeToo movement and that the purpose of the interviews was ‘to get a deeper understanding’ (p. 2). The decision to use surveys and interviews rather than relying on social media data was motivated by their research questions, which were aimed at learning about non-participation in the movement. As such, their paper also makes an important methodological contribution in terms of the importance of broadening the digital data collection approach when scholars aim to study the role of the movement in an individual’s life. Mendes et al. (2018\_ID22) use interviews in combination with online surveys to investigate the promises and drawbacks of hashtag activism on Twitter, and to contextualize the experiences of participants in the movement at different stages of engagement.

Eleven articles employ a critical perspective to the analysis of participation in #MeToo (Gieseler\_2018\_ID4, Hasunuma and Shin\_2019\_ID6, Gill and Orgad\_2018\_ID7, Burgess\_2018\_ID8, De La Garza\_2019\_ID9, Rodino-Colocino\_2018\_ID10, Wexler et al.\_2019\_ID11, Flaskerud\_2019\_ID17, Lang\_2019\_ID18, Fortado\_2018\_ID20, Hearn\_2018\_ID21). The authors of these articles expound narratives around sexual violence and make recommendations based on them. For example, Lang (2019\_ID18) applies a ‘new materialist approach, infused with feminist information studies’ (p. 9). According to the author, previous feminist hashtags have ‘disembodied’ experiences of sexual violence by separating online posts from real-life experiences, but #MeToo has succeeded in ‘making visible survivors’ digitally-represented, flesh-made bodies’ (p. 11). Thus, this method involves ‘attempts to draw out the material implications for hashtags as they circulate across platforms, devices, and bodies’ and consider the author’s ‘own experiences as a body’ that has participated in, and witnessed, the #MeToo movement (p. 11). In addition, the author performs a feminist rhetorical analysis to flesh out the cultural context of the movement, relying on news coverage, a sample of tweets, and Twitter analytics.

## Participation and Non-Participation

There are many reasons for participation in the #MeToo movement. The articles present primarily structural-level motivations, like changes to cultural consciousness, and surprisingly few individual-level ones, such as healing and tools for survivors. Two key structural motivations are feminist solidarity and feminist consciousness. Consciousness-raising is one motivator often mentioned as a reason for participation. Lin and Zhang (2019\_ID5) contains an interview with a woman who questions whether sharing her story will lead to any real social change. Yet despite this, she elaborates that reading passages online helps her understand that she should not be ashamed, but rather her rapist should be. This demonstrates that participation can create a shift in individual consciousness, which is the first step in the healing process for survivors. The article argues that structural change can result from highlighting systemic issues. Hassan et al. (2019\_ID16) finds that a common motivator for sharing one’s story of sexual violence is to give others the courage to speak up, and to build awareness of the pain victims go through. Sharing experiences is an important part of the cycle in which women, like the one interviewed by Lin and Zhang (2019\_ID5), can see these messages, reflect on them, change their perspective, and post messages of their own.

Participation in #MeToo is also motivated by building communities of solidarity and social support (Xiong et al.\_2019\_ID2, Gieseler\_2018\_ID4, Burgess\_2018\_ID8, Flaskerud\_2019\_ID17, Hearn\_2018\_ID21). Feminist solidarity, resulting from transformative empathy, is important in its potential to inspire action. As such, the mobilization of such empathy inspires activism that can result in systemic change (Rodino-Colocino\_2018\_ID10). Twitter allows marginalized groups, who may have complex reasons for not wanting to join activism in the physical world, to participate in #MeToo. These marginalized groups, for example underprivileged or young people (Flaskerud\_2019\_ID17), who historically have had few opportunities to meet up and discuss issues, are able to make their voices heard, share stories, receive and give support to other victim-survivors, and ultimately participate in a space that is often safer and less troublesome than discussions with friends or family, who may not be able to relate. However, Mendes et al. (2018\_ID22) acknowledge that, although online participation may be easier than offline participation, it is rarely easy.

A subtheme of participation also emerged that outlines the reasons why survivors did not participate. Journalist Alexis Benveniste (2017) stresses how sharing survivor stories is a personal and difficult endeavor: ‘Reminder that if a woman didn’t post #MeToo, it doesn’t mean she wasn’t sexually assaulted or harassed. Survivors don’t owe you their story’. Lang (2019\_ID18) points out that there are ‘many reasons that survivors choose to disclose (or not) or report (or not) instances of sexual assault and harassment’ (p. 17). One of the reasons individuals decide against participation is a fear of backlash in the form of trolling, victim blaming, and other forms of retribution or retaliation online. Mendes et al. (2018\_ID22) find that 72% of survey respondents report online abuse in response to their posts. Another often-reported reason for non-participation is the belief that nothing will change, that harassment or abuse will continue, with little repercussion for the perpetrator, even if they do come forward (Hassan et al.\_2019\_ID16). Often, this resignation is linked to the conviction that systemic, structural problems or cultural or social norms will counter any real social change (Hassan et al.\_2019\_ID16, Flaskerud\_2019\_ID17, Fortado\_2018\_ID20). Hassan et al. (2019\_ID16) specifically focus on non-participation of women in the context of Bangladesh, examining how a more sexually conservative culture can undermine movement participation; any discussion about sexual topics is taboo, and talking about harassment is viewed as immodest. A key subtheme for non-participation is the limited acceptance of #MeToo in different cultures (Lin and Zhang\_2019\_ID5, Hasunuma and Shin\_2019\_ID6, Hassan et al.\_2019\_ID16, Flaskerud\_2019\_ID17).

Additional subthemes that we identified under the theme of non-participation are linked to the affective and emotional labor involved in participation. Sharing personal and emotional stories can take a toll on survivors. For example, Hassan et al. (2019\_ID16) note that women in Bangladesh report difficulty in sharing experiences of sexual violence. Feelings of revictimization can function as a barrier to participation – whether that be reliving the experience or experiencing disbelief or negative feedback rather than social support and understanding. Lang (2019\_ID18) finds that disclosure can be risky for survivors, as they may not be believed or may be blamed for the assault. Finally, Hasunuma and Shin (2019\_ID6) identify offline repercussions in the private or professional spheres as barriers to participation.

## Affordances

Another dominant theme focuses on the affordances of the social media sites used for the movement, particularly Twitter. Affordances are defined as the features and technical architecture of social media platforms that offer opportunities for or constraints upon interaction (Davis, 2020). Several studies discuss how the horizontal organization of the internet allows for the rapid spread of information (Xiong et al.\_2019\_ID2, Gieseler\_2018\_ID4, Hasunuma and Shin\_2019\_ID6, Gill and Orgad\_2018\_ID7, Khatua et al.\_2018\_ID12, Rho et al.\_2018\_ID13, Hassan et al.\_2019\_ID16), facilitating the dissemination of information across time and space, and thus widening the audience and potential reach of the #MeToo movement. As Gieseler (2018\_ID4) notes, ‘The power of #MeToo in all of its manifestations is that it reaches across borders where other words and phrases dissipate’ (p. 19). Additionally, the index function of hashtags allows Twitter users to easily sift through, group, and search for relevant postings (Xiong et al.\_2019\_ID2, Khatua et al.\_2018\_ID12, Pandey et al.\_2018\_ID15, Schneider and Carpenter\_2019\_ID19), in this case around #MeToo. Social media also facilitate easy communication between various Twitter users (Xiong et al.\_2019\_ID2, Gill and Orgad\_2018\_ID7, Khatua et al.\_2018\_ID12, Rho et al.\_2018\_ID13), connecting survivors to one another (Xiong et al.\_2019\_ID2, Gieseler\_2018\_ID4, Lin and Zhang\_2019\_ID5, Gill and Orgad\_2018\_ID7, Burgess\_2018\_ID8, Khatua et al.\_2018\_ID12) and opening up potential for communities of support and comfort. While one article mentions the rise of self-reported stories (Khatua et al.\_2018\_ID12), sexual violence survivors are also able to participate in the movement without disclosing the specifics of their own experiences of abuse. Finally, the hashtag elicits and enables intense emotional responses (Rho et al.\_2018\_ID13), and its use creates a sense of being ‘useful’ among participants (Foster\_2019\_ID14, Mendes et al.\_2018\_ID22).

While these articles mostly stress how the affordances of social media enable the #MeToo movement, others note a number of drawbacks. De La Garza (2019\_ID9), Rodino-Colocino (2018\_ID10), and Flaskerud (2019\_ID17) point out the hashtag’s potential for creating a false sense of solidarity by universalizing the experiences of sexual violence survivors and ignoring the different experiences of women from various backgrounds (see intersectionality). De La Garza (2019\_ID9) states: ‘The ubiquitous use of #MeToo as a marker of resistance in today’s feminist discursive contexts not only supports the erasure of the specific oppressive subjectivities needing articulation, but also *hides* forces of oppression by creating a public façade of a solidarity that does not really exist, and which does not typically nurture sustained difficult dialogues’ (p. 177, italics in original). Thus, short messages constrained to 140 characters (increased to 280 in 2017), as well as the volume and speed of communication, are all affordances of Twitter that contribute to what some refer to as a façade of solidarity, rather than genuine engagement.

Other studies note the lack of privacy in online communities and point out that the public and permanent nature of posting online can discourage people from participating in the movement (Hassan et al.\_2019\_ID16, Mendes et al.\_2018\_ID22). As Mendes et al. (2018\_ID22) write, although it can be easier and safer to voice feminist concerns in online spaces than in the physical world, publicly engaging in activism can also cause friction with family and friends due to the stigma of feminists as ‘troublemakers.’

Finally, three articles note that the volume and speed of social media are affordances that lead to conversations that are short-lived and that fail to spark systemic or structural forms of social change around gendered relations, notably within the justice system (Muhlmeyer et al.\_2019\_ID3, Burgess\_2018\_ID8, De La Garza\_2019\_ID9). Muhlmeyer et al. (2019\_ID3) concludes that ‘social media discussion will begin when active social campaigning for the cause is popular and a fresh topic and degrade over time… discussion will never fully cease, but it will still degrade to the point where only a relatively small number of individuals are involved in the active discussion’ (p. 205).

## Geography

The #MeToo movement originated in the US, yet participation has occurred on a global scale. Seven of the 22 studies base their research in specific geographic locations. Two studies focus on the US (Xiong et al.\_2019\_ID2 and Burgess\_2018\_ID8), one focuses on China (Lin and Zhang\_2019\_ID5), and one focuses on Bangladesh (Hassan et al.\_2019\_ID16). Some studies conduct comparative work: one compares Japan and South Korea (Hasunuma and Shin\_2019\_ID6); one focuses on the Americas, Asia, Africa, Middle East, and the Nordic countries (Flaskerud\_2019\_ID17); and finally, one studies Finland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom (Hearn\_2018\_ID21).

Fifteen articles do not specify a geographic focus (Manikonda et al.\_2018\_ID1, Muhlmeyer et al.\_2019\_ID3, Gieseler\_2018\_ID4, Gill and Orgad\_2018\_ID7, De La Garza\_2019\_ID9, Rodino-Colocino\_2018\_ID10, Wexler et al.\_2019\_ID11, Khatua et al.\_2018\_ID12, Rho et al.\_2018\_ID13, Foster\_2019\_ID14, Pandey et al.\_2018\_ID15, Lang\_2019\_ID18, Schneider and Carpenter\_2019\_ID19, Fortado\_2018\_ID20, Mendes et al.\_2018\_ID22). This may reflect the challenges inherent in determining the originating geolocation of tweets, which is typical of social media research (Buchel and Pennington, 2016). Alternatively, it may reflect the silence accompanying various privileges: often this reflects dominant perspectives and identities that are seen as universal (Frankenberg, 1993). Of the fifteen unspecified articles, we infer seven to be US-oriented/-based research (Muhlmeyer et al.\_2019\_ID3, Rodino-Colocino\_2018\_ID10, Wexler et al.\_2019\_ID11, Khatua et al.\_2018\_ID12, Rho et al.\_2018\_ID13, Pandey et al.\_2018\_ID15, Lang\_2019\_ID18). For example, although Khatua et al. (2018\_ID12) do not specify the location that the collected tweets originate from nor any focus on a geographic region, the authors refer in their study to the per capita rate of rape in the US, suggesting that their focus is on the US. While #MeToo can be celebrated as a global movement, the omission of any reference to geography or a lack of geographic diversity suggests that scholarship on the #MeToo movement may be predominantly US-centric.

Of the 22 articles in the sample, eight acknowledge that their research findings might differ across place and culture (Xiong et al.\_2019\_ID2, Gieseler\_2018\_ID4, Hasunuma and Shin\_2019\_ID6, Gill and Orgad\_2018\_ID7, De La Garza\_2019\_ID9, Rho et al.\_2018\_ID13, Hassan et al.\_2019\_ID16, Flaskerud\_2019\_ID17). For example, Xiong et al. (2018\_ID2) acknowledges that a limitation of their study is that ‘the research only examines the tweets in the United States’ (p. 20). Additionally, of these nine articles, we identified three as being in-depth studies of geographical differences (Xiong et al.\_2019\_ID2, Hasunuma and Shin\_2019\_ID6, Flaskerud\_2019\_ID17). The most globally exhaustive of these three articles is Flaskerud’s (2019\_ID17), which argues that the #MeToo movement has created a false sense of solidarity among women when in reality it has produced very different effects around the world. For instance, the article documents the different rates of uptake of the movement in various countries and notes how culture and religious beliefs affect its success.

Five of the articles are international collaborations (Hasunuma and Shin\_2019\_ID6, Khatua et al.\_2018\_ID12, Hassan et al.\_2019\_ID16, Hearn\_2018\_ID21, Mendes et al.\_2018\_ID22) which aim to answer questions about how the #MeToo movement affects different places and what factors contribute to these unique reactions. For instance, Hassan et al. (2019\_ID16) present a study on the non-participation of Bangladeshi women in the #MeToo movement and Hasunuma and Shin (2019\_ID6) compare reasons for participation in South Korea and Japan. These international collaborations demonstrate the importance of cross-cultural analysis and its role in creating a more comprehensive understanding of the movement as it evolves over time and moves into different spaces.

## Intersectionality

Out of the 22 articles, nine address questions of intersectionality (Manikonda et al.\_2018\_ID1, Gieseler\_2018\_ID4, Lin and Zhang\_2019\_ID5, Gill and Orgad\_2018\_ID7, Burgess\_2018\_ID8, De La Garza\_2019\_ID9, Rodino-Colocino\_2018\_ID10, Flaskerud\_2019\_ID17, Lang\_2019\_ID18). Intersectionality examines how various axes of social stratification (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, class) combine and overlap to oppress different groups (Collins and Bilge, 2016). Crenshaw (1989) originally used the term to describe how racism and sexism interact to oppress Black girls and women; the term has gained broader meaning and is applied to different forms of multidimensional discrimination.

Of the nine articles, eight discuss the intersections of ethnicity and gender within the #MeToo movement (Manikonda et al.\_2018\_ID1, Gieseler\_2018\_ID4, Gill and Orgad\_2018\_ID7, Burgess\_2018\_ID8, De La Garza\_2019\_ID9, Rodino-Colocino\_2018\_ID10, Flaskerud\_2019\_ID17, Lang\_2019\_ID18). Gieseler (2018\_ID4) discusses the danger of ‘feminist whitewashing’ – the diminishment of issues specific to women of color, creating an ‘outside-within’ feeling (para. 29). These authors emphasize the need to integrate the voices and participation of marginalized groups, further stressing how identity politics may reveal ‘a greater conversation regarding the intersection of oppressive, violent forces against women of color and moreover, all oppressed communities’ (para. 5). Several articles (Gieseler\_2018\_ID4, Gill and Orgad\_2018\_ID7, Burgess\_2018\_ID8, Wexler et al.\_2019\_ID11, Lang\_2019\_ID18) point out that, while Tarana Burke intended the #MeToo movement to be about listening to and acknowledging the experiences of vulnerable groups, it gained momentum only when White Hollywood actor Alyssa Milano’s tweet went viral. This suggests, as Gieseler (2018\_ID4) states, that ‘the outrage simply wasn’t there for the Black women who were put in vulnerable positions by rich White men’ (see Hill (2017), cited in Gieseler (2018\_ID4), para 8). Flaskerud (2019\_ID17) describes how stereotypes and the ‘prototypical’ US victim ‘worthy of rallying around’ (p. 729) is rarely Black or Brown and raises important questions about whether changes brought by #MeToo will truly help all women.

Lin and Zhang (2019\_ID5) discusses intersectionality in relation to disability in the Chinese context. The authors argue that, given that disabled individuals are more than three times as likely to be victims of violence, disabled people’s needs should be central, and not marginal, to the movement. These arguments are echoed by Gill and Orgad (2018\_ID7), who warn that the movement marginalizes members of the LGBTQ+ community who also experience sexual violence.

Despite this, it is important to realize that social hierarchies that privilege some voices or experiences while marginalizing others persist, thereby reflecting offline social inequalities and intersectional oppression. Lang (2019\_ID18) discusses how contemporary culture’s focus on celebrity ‘has obscured or erased the concerns of non-elite women, women of color, working-class women, women with disabilities, trans women, and queer women, even as the movement was propelled into virality by those women’ (p. 18). This article argues that, for these reasons, ‘intersectional feminist rhetorics may become more difficult to recognise on social media platforms’ (p. 18). It becomes clear that an inherent tendency to marginalize those groups that are in most need – in online and offline spaces – is a concern that #MeToo conversations should address.

## Backlash

Eight of the 22 articles mention some form of backlash against the #MeToo movement (Manikonda et al.\_2018\_ID1, Gieseler\_2018\_ID4, Hasunuma and Shin\_2019\_ID6, Gill and Orgad\_2018\_ID7, Burgess\_2018\_ID8, Rho et al.\_2018\_ID13, Flaskerud\_2019\_ID17, Schneider and Carpenter\_2019\_ID19). Most commonly, the studies describe two types of negative reactions: first, criticism of the movement for being misguided or not sufficiently inclusive; and second, hostile responses from social media users (e.g., vitriol, trolling, etc.). Additionally, Hasunuma and Shin (2019\_ID6) use the term ‘backlash’ to characterize court rulings and legal barriers unfavorable to sexual assault survivors in Japan and Korea, and a persistent culture of blaming women, rather than perpetrators, for their experiences of sexual violence.

Addressing the first type, several articles cite criticism of the #MeToo movement related to inclusivity. Burgess (2018\_ID8) describes a recurring theme in which #MeToo is characterized as overly emotional. The authors argue that #MeToo is constructed as posing a threat to men’s livelihood, and that ‘the due process of law has become, to a large extent, the dominant, acceptable narrative for those who wish to arrest the movement’s momentum’ (p. 344). Other voices, which are generally supportive of feminism and that recognize sexual violence as an essential social and political issue, criticize the #MeToo movement for representing mostly the perspectives of privileged Western women (Gill and Orgad\_2018\_ID7, Flaskerud\_2019\_ID17). For example, Gill and Orgad (2018\_ID7) note that the movement’s ‘politics and aesthetics are exclusionary in various problematic ways’ (p. 1319). The authors cite writers and activists who critique #MeToo for centering on the experiences of White, heterosexual women while disregarding the voices of women of color, LGBTQ+ women, and women with disabilities. Finally, some authors reiterate criticism of the #MeToo movement’s initial narrow focus on sexual misdemeanor in the workplace (Gill and Orgad\_2018\_ID7). Another issue, as a journalist quoted in Gieseler (2018\_ID4) notes, is that Milano’s tweet conflates women who have been sexually assaulted with women who have been sexually harassed, presumably trying to capture a broad spectrum of harmful experiences but failing to differentiate between criminal and ‘creepy’ behavior.

The second type of criticism focuses on hostile responses from social media users. In a survey of individuals who had discussed feminism and rape culture online (Mendes et al.\_2018\_ID22), 72% had experienced negativity, hostility, or trolling in response to their posts. The analyses of #MeToo discussions on Twitter and Reddit by Manikonda et al. (2018\_ID1) reveal several negative terms that frequently appear in the posts (e.g., ‘witch hunt,’ ‘hysterical,’ ‘nonsense,’ and ‘damaging’), which the authors interpret as possibly mocking the movement. Schneider and Carpenter (2019\_ID19) investigate tweets containing the #MeToo hashtag and find that a small yet notable number of tweets express negative reactions, such as disbelief toward survivors and criticism of the movement. Rho et al. (2018\_ID13) analyses comments that Facebook users had posted in response to news articles about #MeToo. According to their findings, readers, especially those of the alt-right online publication Breitbart, use strong negative and sexual language when discussing #MeToo, describing it as a ‘joke’ and the women who speak up as ‘whores’ who use sex to advance their careers. The backlash against the movement emerges as an important theme, requiring additional examination.

## Sexual Violence Prevention

One of the final themes that emerged is how to reduce sexual violence against women. We identified this theme in five resources (Lin and Zhang\_2019\_ID5, Hasunuma and Shin\_2019\_ID6, Burgess\_2018\_ID8, Rodino-Colocino\_2018\_ID10, Khatua et al.\_2018\_ID12). These studies recommend education about sexual violence and consent, but also larger structural changes.

Hasunuma and Shin (2019\_ID6) argue for legal reforms in Japan and South Korea to ‘promote the kind of cultural and legal space in which women can speak out and seek justice’ (p. 107). According to the authors, sexual harassment does not count as a crime in these countries (at the time of publication of their article): they report that rape is narrowly defined, and there are no major laws preventing sexual violence in the current legal system. To address these critical issues, they propose more support services for sexual assault survivors and more women in positions of legal authority. They also call for a change in how police investigate sexual assaults and how medical examinations are performed on survivors, arguing that such changes will reduce humiliation and avoid inflicting additional trauma.

Some sources (Hasunuma and Shin\_2019\_ID6, Rodino-Colocino\_2018\_ID10) identify a mutually beneficial relationship between empowerment as experienced by survivors and structural changes. For instance, Hasunuma and Shin (2019\_ID6) argue that institutions must incorporate the empowerment fostered by the #MeToo movement into their policies. By contrast, for Rodino-Colocino (2018\_ID10), ‘empathy may be the starting point for structural change, [and] structural change may also advance empathy for girls and women of color who are victim-survivors’ (p. 99, parenthesis added). These studies suggest that individual empowerment through participation in #MeToo and structural changes in the form of policies and legislation can work in tandem.

## Research Recommendations

Four articles from the sample offer suggestions for future research. Two make specific recommendations (Xiong et al.\_2019\_ID2, Muhlmeyer et al.\_2019\_ID3), while two offer more general directions (Lang\_2019\_ID18, Mendes et al.\_2018\_ID22). Those articles that do make recommendations usually provide these in concise form as concluding thoughts.

Xiong et al. (2018\_ID2) – a study about how social movement organizations such as Equality Now or Feminist Majority Foundation participated in the #MeToo movement – suggests that future studies should cover a larger number of such organizations and a larger time span than their project did (21 organizations over 83 days). They also recommend that initiatives, institutions, and media outlets beyond social movement organizations should be studied, as these also shape the online discussions around #MeToo. Finally, Xiong et al. (2018\_ID2) suggest that future research should address cultural differences in how the hashtag is used across different countries. Muhlmeyer et al. (2019\_ID3) recommend examining additional social media sites like Tumblr to compare these results against prevalent Twitter-based studies. Lang (2019\_ID18) and Mendes et al. (2018\_ID22) make general recommendations rather than specific; both broadly suggest that scholarship should continue to pay attention to feminist hashtag activism.

# Discussion

The present study fills a gap in our understanding of #MeToo by investigating through a synthesis review how scholars have approached the study of a movement that is spread across multiple social media platforms and geographic regions. A striking finding is the limited number of studies on #MeToo; 22 in total. The majority of resources – 988 items – recognized #MeToo as a significant social movement but failed to analyze participation, either online or offline, in the movement itself. This finding indicates an important opportunity for further research into the #MeToo movement by engaging directly with the posts and conversations that have taken place – and continue to take place – on social media platforms and by looking at spill-over effects (activities that take place offline).

All 22 papers discuss ‘methods used’: eleven employ a critical lens to the study, eight use quantitative analysis, two use mixed methods and one uses qualitative. There is additional need for qualitative studies that directly engage individuals who participated in the movement to learn about their experiences in their own words (see: Mendes and Ringrose, 2019).

When exploring the geography theme, we noticed that over half of the authors in our set fail to identify a clear geographic focus to their research, raising concerns about a lack of global diversity and a bias toward Global North perspectives in scholarship about #MeToo. As Flaskerud (2019\_ID17) points out, the various cultural norms and practices of a given space will impact people’s ability to participate in such activities and will affect the outcomes of this participation. To further complicate the geographic component of social media research, different people will experience the same space differently. *Home* for some people is seen as a space of refuge from an often-hostile outside (Creswell, 2004), while for others, home is the main site of the violence they experience. Because of such differing experiences, the movement needs to be studied as tied to particular spaces, bounded geographies, and social contexts (e.g., cultural, religious). We suggest future investigations also look at the spread of #MeToo in regions with limited technology access or large digital gender divides (Robinson et al., 2020). According to a 2017 UN report, women in Africa were 25% less likely to have Internet access than men and in Least Developed Countries (LDC), only one out of seven women used the Internet compared to one out of five men (International Telecommunication Union, 2017). Studying #MeToo in these regions, often postcolonial societies, is critical because, as Robertson and Ayazi (2019) state, women in crisis regions from Afghanistan to Sudan, despite the technological barriers, use social media to advocate for gender equality. For example, recent research on #MeToo focuses on Latin America (Garibotti and Hopp, 2019); yet this work needs to be further expanded and cross-cultural studies are also lacking.

An almost equally high number of articles (17) discuss affordances. Predominantly, these studies highlight how social media enables #MeToo by allowing the hashtag to spread quickly and widely and helping sexual violence survivors connect. However, they also caution against overestimating the potential of social media to unify survivors and to make a lasting social impact. Most of the discussions of affordances center on Twitter, partially because that is where Alyssa Milano shared her famous tweet. Also, the relative ease with which researchers can obtain Twitter data, as compared to other social media platforms, and the large volume of text-heavy content, make Twitter attractive for quantitative analyses. Future studies should include other social media sites to understand how #MeToo spreads across platforms (CBS, 2017) and how #MeToo participants interact with the features and functions of these platforms to share their stories.

Intersectionality also emerges as a prominent theme in existing research about #MeToo. Authors are mostly concerned with the movement’s disproportionate amount of attention paid to privileged White women and the erasure of experiences and struggles specific to women of color, disabled and transgender individuals, and the LGBTQ+ community. While the relative anonymity of social media can make it challenging to identify and acknowledge these voices (Mendes et al., 2019), scholars have recently begun to unpack the various layers of oppression impacting participation in the movement, in particular those affecting Black girls and women (Ryan, 2019; Trott, 2020).

An almost equally important theme is the backlash against the movement (eight articles), including criticism as well as belittling and misogynistic responses to #MeToo posts on social media. For example, Manikonda et al. find in their analysis negativity toward personal stories, yet do not further examine how the platform algorithms or toxic social media cultures contribute to negativity. Massanari (2017) in a long-term participant-observation and ethnographic study of #Gamergate on Reddit examines how its karma point system, aggregation of material across subreddits, governance structure, and policies regarding offensive posts functions as “fertile ground for anti-feminist and misogynistic activism” (p. 329).

In terms of directions for future research, the articles in our set make few recommendations and mostly focus on cross-platform comparisons, longitudinal studies and cultural diversity. Some of these recommendations have been addressed by scholars since our original database search. Most notably, a 21-chapter edited volume by Fileborn and Loney-Howes (2019) critically interrogates the #MeToo movement from various angles, focuses on intersectionality and includes diverse geographical and cultural perspectives. Importantly, there remains a need to study how #MeToo has unfolded across various social media sites and how it has developed over time. We also recommend that researchers explore the use of #MeToo during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of the unique circumstances of the pandemic (e.g., lockdown, uncertainty), domestic violence has surged globally (Taub, 2020). To what extent can hashtags like #MeToo provide support amongst those experiencing gendered violence?

The impact of the #MeToo movement is a theme we do not discuss in this paper. Several studies mention this broadly, but none provide examples of tangible social change resulting from #MeToo. This theme may be absent because such impact, like attitude change, is hard to measure and more time is needed to capture it. While more research has recently emerged on how individuals and organizations have responded to #MeToo (e.g., Fileborn and Loney-Howes, 2019), we call for future work to focus on what #MeToo has (or has not) achieved, and how it has channeled social change. A key limitation of our study is a bias toward Anglo-American centric research that comes from searching for the English hashtag (and movement name). Future research can complement our study by focusing on hashtags linked to digital feminism in other languages like #YoTambien.

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# Appendix A

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| **ID** | **Article reference** |
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1. In line with previous researchers (Mendes et al., 2019), we classified #MeToo as feminist because its aims align with a long history of feminist activism to combat sexual violence. As such, movements can be considered feminist even if individual actors (or movements themselves) do not necessarily identify with this label. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)