

**FROM 'ME TOO' TO #METOO:
UNCOVERING THE POWER OF HASHTAGS**

Capstone

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Abstract

This case study analyzed the communications patterns and behaviours that emerged on Twitter within the first twenty-four hours of Alyssa Milano's call to action on Twitter that launched the #MeToo movement. It examined the form, elements, topics of discussion, and tone employed by Twitter users in participating in the hashtag-driven conversation. The research showed that the majority of #MeToo activity on Twitter was in the form of retweets, and the content comprised mainly of text-only messages that shared stories of sexual violence. This research showed that there was a collective desire to create an understanding of the issue of sexual harassment and sexual violence from multiple perspectives. This collective desire coupled with strong alignment between the hashtag's semantics and its metanarrative contributed to the hashtag being frequently retweeted. The frequent retweeting of #MeToo had a great mobilizing capacity as its metanarrative moved across geographic, demographic and virtual boundaries. The significance of this research is in its ability to inform how hashtags can mobilize widespread support that influences social action.

Key Words: #MeToo, hashtags, Twitter, communications, social action.

Introduction

The hashtag, a tool introduced by Twitter, has created a new way of communicating that has spread across other social networking sites and into the public sphere. Hashtags may be useful to search topics or ideas but a specific use for hashtags has emerged: using hashtags as slogans that call for social change. Hashtag-driven communications used in campaigns like #BlackLivesMatter, #IdleNoMore, and #JeSuisCharlie are some examples of hashtags that flag a topic and demonstrate a call to action for social responsibility. #MeToo was one such phenomenon that began as a single call to action on October 15, 2017, when celebrity Alyssa Milano tweeted: “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet”.¹ Within twenty-four hours the #MeToo hashtag went viral across all social networking sites garnering immediate wide-spread support.

To understand how the #MeToo hashtag was promulgated to produce a social movement in such a short span of time, this research leaned on concepts from the fields of technological determinism, communications for social change, and social media to explore the form, content, topics of discussion, and tone that were contained within #MeToo Twitter posts. Though this research does not focus on the topic of feminism, it leaned on intersectional feminism theory to discern concepts that were at play in the #MeToo movement. The significance of this research is in its ability to inform how hashtags can mobilize widespread support that influences collective action towards social responsibility.

¹ Milano 2017

Research Problem

This study used a content analysis to examine how Twitter users responded to a call to action that collectively drove and empowered the #MeToo movement. Specifically, this research studied how Twitter users were using the #MeToo hashtag within the first twenty-four hours of conversation. This examination sought to provide insight into how the hashtag was being applied in form, content, topic, and tone.

The uptake of the #MeToo hashtag was immediate and the hashtag went viral within twenty-four hours, traversing many virtual, geographic, and demographic boundaries. The #MeToo hashtag was disseminated through Twitter's network which is conducive to reaching broader audiences and in mobilizing publics.² Hence it was hypothesized that a high frequency of using a hashtag on Twitter that communicates a call to social action, is positively related to garnering immediate widespread support, and social activity. Three research questions were established to test this hypothesis.

Research Questions

The focus of this study was to describe the #MeToo movement that erupted on Twitter in the context of which communication patterns and behaviours were used to post messages alongside the hashtag. The data that was collected and analyzed came from a social media content analysis of public tweets that used the hashtag #MeToo within the first twenty-four hours of Milano's first 'me too' call to action. The following three questions guided this research:

² Bode and Dalrymple, 2016: 312

RQ1: What were the communication patterns demonstrated by Twitter users who participated in the #MeToo conversation in the first twenty-four hours of the original call to action?

Data was compiled to describe the communications pattern that emerged within twenty-four hours of the conversation. This research question looked at both the form of the message and the tools used to communicate. The form considered if the message was delivered as a tweet, retweet, or reply. Twitter posts were then analyzed for content elements that shaped the message. Content elements considered the inclusion of text, emojis, links, additional hashtags, and tagging other twitter handles within the post.

RQ2: What topics were being discussed by Twitter users participating in the #MeToo conversation?

These data were collected to describe the topic of conversation that emanated with the use of the #MeToo hashtag. The following conversational themes were pre-defined:

- self-identifying with #MeToo as a victim of sexual harassment, assault, or abuse.
- sharing a personal story, experience, or sentiment on sexual harassment, assault, and abuse.
- sharing someone else's story, experience, or sentiment on sexual harassment, assault, and abuse.
- a call to action to encourage others to self-identify using #MeToo or a call to address the issue of sexual violence in another way.
- expressing heartfelt concern for victims.
- offering support or direction to resources for those who may need it.
- expressing negativity towards perpetrators, those accused, or on the issue of sexual violence.
- thanking those who self-identified with #MeToo.

- mainstream media coverage on #MeToo
- other topics

RQ3: How did #MeToo posts split in tonality?

This research question gauged the tone of the posts, counting positive as demonstrating support for the call to social action for this movement, negative as against the call to social action for this movement, and neutral for those that were neither for nor against the call to action. The call to action in this research is seen as individuals self-identifying and/or taking part in the conversation noting the importance of addressing the issue of sexual harassment and sexual violence.

Literature Review

Technological Determinism

Technological determinism finds its roots with economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen who formulated the concept and began framing the theory. Veblen was keenly interested in understanding the role of technology in social, economic and cultural change.³ Since Veblen, hard and soft theorists have evolved in the field.⁴ Chandler (2013) notes the distinction where hard theorists take the position that communication technology determines social change, while soft theorists frame communication technology as merely one factor that contributes to social change. Smith and Marx (1995) describe hard and soft theorists as occupying extreme ends of the same spectrum. Though these two schools of thought continue to persist within the field, technological determinism can “provide scholars with a menu for examining the relationship

³ de la Cruz Paragas and Lin 2016. Papageorgiou and Michaelides 2016

⁴ Chandler 2013

between technology and society that is much more nuanced than either technological or social determinism”.⁵

Throughout history, there has always been an apparent interplay between the technology itself, and how individuals interact with and use that technology.⁶ Technological determinism has taken on heightened significance in our current environment of instant connectivity made possible by web 2.0 technologies.⁷ The concept that technology impacts society is more real now than it was during Veblen’s time at the turn of the 20th century; yet technological determinism theorists continue to vary on how to conceptualize technology within a social context.

Similar to technological innovations of the past, new technology is often and mistakenly viewed solely as a tool.⁸ When one considers the use of Social Networking Sites (SNS) it is indisputable that social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are more than tools, they “penetrate all aspects of contemporary life.”⁹ Van Dijck (2013) explains that collaborators on social media environments co-develop with the technology where user tactics contribute to shaping people’s daily lives.¹⁰ This researcher labels the current digital landscape of interconnectivity as a driver of social experiences in the digital age. This is reminiscent of earlier work in the field by McLuhan (1967) who claimed that “the extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act—the way we perceive the world”.¹¹ McLuhan (1967) went as far as to claim the medium chosen to communicate through become the message itself.

⁵ de la Cruz Paragas and Lin 2016: 1532

⁶ DeSanctis and Poole 1994

⁷ Lehman-Wilzig and Cohen-Avigdor 2004

⁸ Mutwkwe 2012

⁹ Deuze 2011:137

¹⁰ Van Dijck 2013

¹¹ McLuhan 1967: 41

Some contemporary researchers use the term *mediapolis*¹² to describe the current social climate “a public space where media underpin and overarch the experiences and expressions of everyday life”¹³ Deuze (2011) expands on this through the perspective that we live in media as oppose to with it. Similarly, Campbell and Park’s (2008) study on the social effects born from the widespread adoption of mobile devices found that mobile technology encircles social experiences to the extent of creating “a new personal communication society”.¹⁴

The technology of social media has created a new social environment, one where content consumers are also content creators, known as *producers*.¹⁵ Bruns (2008) who coined the term defines users of social media as hybrid *producers* as they are both users and producers of information. This researcher notes that hybrid users, in turn, create dynamic and ever-evolving products, described as *produsage*.

The decentralization of information flow born from the internet has created an obvious social shift.¹⁶

Many of the habits that have become permeated by social media platforms used to be informal and ephemeral manifestations of social life. Talking to friends, exchanging gossip, showing holiday pictures A major change is that through social media these casual speech acts have turned into formalized inscriptions which once embedded in the larger economy of wider publics take on a different value.¹⁷

¹² de Jong and Schuilenburg 2006; Silverstone 2007

¹³ Deuze 2011: 137

¹⁴ Campbell and Park 2008: 371

¹⁵ Bruns 2008

¹⁶ Castells 2008

¹⁷ Van Dijck 2013: 6-7

From this perspective, social media is creating a social shift not only in how we are socializing, but also in how we are affecting our social environment.

Convergence culture was conceptualized as a phenomenon that results from the intersection of multiple media platforms, a culture of engagement, and a collective intelligence that together drives change.¹⁸ Jenkins (2006) who researched media convergence describes social media as a collective process where:

convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others. . . . Because there is more information on any given topic than anyone can store in their head, there is an added incentive for us to talk among ourselves about the media we consume. This conversation creates buzz.¹⁹

This buzz is seen through individuals sharing their knowledge and opinions as they participate in an online conversation. The widespread participation that is occurring on social media is further supported by an anytime, anywhere capability of mobile devices and this is framing our social reality.²⁰

Contemporary technological determinism theorists continue to be divided, while some argue that technology is socially determined, others believe technology and social structures co-evolve, and then there are those who believe the effects of technology are determined by how it is applied.²¹ However technology and society are conceptualized, it cannot be denied that a relationship exists between them. "Technological determinism and social determinism constitute

¹⁸ Jenkins 2006

¹⁹ Jenkins 2006: 4

²⁰ Abeelee, De Wolf, and Ling 2018: 5

²¹ Adler 2006

a continuum, rather than a dichotomy, of theories about the relationship of technology and society".²²

Communications for Social Change (CSC)

Social change is a concept born from sociology, which examines changes in values, norms, and behaviours in a society.²³ Social change challenges the mainstream²⁴ and is produced by "a significant change of structured social action or the culture in a given society, community, or context".²⁵ There is no denying that modes and means of communicating have a role to play not only in how meaning is conveyed but also in how to facilitate social action.

Twentieth century theorist E.P. Thompson was a strong proponent that "ordinary voices contribute to social change, while R. Williams believed that "communication systems acted as a form of continuous informal education".²⁶ Though these two theorists were previously not considered within the context of CSC theory their contributions are now being pulled to the forefront in an attempt to understand the many dimensions of communications in the context of social change.

Dagron (2009) in an attempt to define communications for development and social change echoes the sentiments of Thompson and says:

It is about people taking into their own hands the communication processes that will allow them to make their voices heard . . . to take decisions on the development issues

²² de la Cruz Paragas and Lin 2016: 1528

²³ Çam, & Kayaoglu 2014

²⁴ Dutta 2011

²⁵ Servaes 2011: 1

²⁶ Thomas 2017a: 407

that affect their lives, to ultimately achieve social changes for the benefit of their community.²⁷

Dagron (2009) contends that despite the research conducted to date, what causes participatory action for any movement remains poorly understood.

Many academic researchers have flagged the lack of consideration given to public relations scholarship in CSC theory as problematic.²⁸ Waisbord (2015) expresses the need for more research that demonstrates the connection between CSC and participation to understand community mobilization from the bottom-up. He argues that framing community mobilization, as a communicative process is a much-needed contribution to both fields of study. “Embedding the study of communication in the affirmation of human, social, and political rights is necessary to advance rights-based approaches to social change”.²⁹

Thomas (2017b) sought to define variables of social change in his research on social action in India’s Jan Sunwai movement. Thomas found that “social movements committed to social change are successful to the extent that their actions are motivated by shared, felt needs and the utilization of repertoires of contention that are familiar and grounded in a moral economy”.³⁰ Though this researcher argues that “participation and empowerment as core objectives of CSC”³¹ he also insists that further research is needed to give a more fulsome understanding of the relationship between social networks and social change.

²⁷ Dagron 2009: 453

²⁸ Coombs and Holladay 2012; Waisbord 2015

²⁹ Waisbord 2015: 160

³⁰ Thomas 2017b: 720

³¹ Thomas 2017b: 720

Ciszek (2017) sought to address this gap in his research on LGBT activism and argued that public relations scholarship is key to changing public opinions and policies. He conceptualized activism as a form of strategic communications that challenges the hegemony of society by arguing that it is the socio-cultural implications of both CSC and Public Relations that ties these two disciplines together. “Communication for development and social change, activism and public relations are not antagonistic but rather occupy a fluid space informed by cultural-economic forces”.³²

“Participation today has become an instrument of power used by a variety of sectors”,³³ which highlights the need for a renewal of CSC theory. “If communication is to be leveraged to make a difference in people’s lives, then there simply has to be a renewed commitment to an understanding of how society works, how power flows and who controls the means of production”.³⁴ This is due to the effect of a digital landscape that has redefined the means of production and information flow. The increasing mediatization occurring in the daily lives of individuals are afforded by new gatekeepers to information and its dissemination—search engines and social media.³⁵ “New media enable a more differentiated and fine-grained push of media towards audiences, on the one hand, and a scaled-up and more active media engagement by people, on the other”.³⁶ Hence web 2.0 and new media are not just new tools and channels; they enable each individual to share information, voice concerns, and flag issues on a platform that facilitates immediate dissemination and conversation.

³² Ciszek 2017: 702

³³ Thomas 2017a: 405-406

³⁴ Thomas 2017a: 408

³⁵ Mutwke 2012; Schroeder 2018

³⁶ Schroeder 2018: 326

Schroeder (2018) acknowledges that an examination between media and society is complex in our current digital climate. He argues that if we are to truly understand the socio-cultural impact of media “it must be based on evidence about how new technologies are integrated into everyday life.”³⁷ It was the question of how individuals are selecting and using social media technology that formed the impetus for Comunello, Mulargia, and Parisi (2016) undertaking a media ecological approach. Instead of looking at one event or one single movement these researchers considered many platforms and many movements initiated by Italian activists. Their research was based on a current gap in literature that failed to understand why and how activists were using social networking sites to challenge the status quo and call for change. What was revealed from their research was that activists’ attitudes and experiences using social networking sites were shaped by both networking strategies and perceived affordances and constraints of each platform.

Neuman, Guggenheim, Mo Jang, and Bae (2014) in their research of different media channels found that compared to traditional media “social media are more responsive to public order and social issues”.³⁸ Shi (2013) sought to provide a more comprehensive understanding of web 2.0 in relation to rapid socio-economic changes in China and found that “the use of new media and ICT matters greatly to social change and development” (p. 2).³⁹ Shi (2013) defined ICT as “including both computer and internet-based technologies as well as telecommunication networks”⁴⁰ and defined new media as the content developed and distributed through ICT networks. How social media is shaping our identity and culture is gaining much attention across

³⁷ Schroeder 2018: 325

³⁸ Neuman, Guggenheim, Mo Jang and Bae 2014: 199

³⁹ Shi 2013: 2

⁴⁰ Shi 2013: 2

many disciplines particularly sociology, public relations, and activism, this is due to the affordance of communications and social interactions via a one-click process.⁴¹

The role of technology in creating a global network that can communicate instantaneously continues to have a profound effect on people's lives individually and collectively. Though activism and advocacy were traditionally considered to exist on the peripheries of the Excellence theory, concepts in social and media are beginning to take on an increasingly important role in public relations scholarship.⁴² Social media is more than merely a place to interact; it promotes understanding "so the demands of a new cultural environment can be met".⁴³

Social Media

With the rapid proliferation of internet applications, new media terms seem to overlap resulting in unclear definitions of social media in particular. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) highlight the confusion in the field as definitions of Social media include Web 2.0 and User Generated Content (UGC), yet these researchers use both concepts in their own interpretation of social media. "We consider Web 2.0 as the platform for the evolution of social media. . . . User Generated Content can be seen as the sum of all ways in which people make use of Social Media".⁴⁴ Integrating these two concepts into social media however, does support a definition that accurately reflects the rapid evolution of new technologies that successively build off each other to redefine the publishing landscape.

⁴¹ Yalda 2013

⁴² Coombs and Holladay 2012

⁴³ Sawyer and Chen 2012: 151

⁴⁴ Kaplan and Haenlein 2010: 61

This research study will be guided by the following definition where “social media refers to the means of interactions among people in which they create share, exchange and comment contents among themselves in virtual communities and networks”.⁴⁵ Though this provides a simple definition, Shahjahan and Chisty’s (2014) agree that Social Networking Sites are more than simply platforms for sharing information and ideas they have “become an integral part of the contemporary classroom, of advertising and public relations industries, of political campaigning and of numerous other aspects of our daily existence”.⁴⁶

The current socio-cultural landscape has created conditions that support the use of micro-blogging sites like Twitter, where messages are quickly disseminated in a public domain.⁴⁷ Twitter’s 140 character limit “coupled with an easy categorization of a theme through a hashtag (#), allows a presentation of cultural, social, and political interests in a consistent and visible manner”.⁴⁸ Twitter gives its users the ability to connect in different ways, and this connection provides insight into users’ needs providing unprecedented opportunities for marketing, civic activism, public policies, and many other areas and industries.⁴⁹ Though researchers have sought to measure social media usage and impact using personal behaviour traits, social behavior and mass communications theories,⁵⁰ the popularity of Twitter as a personal publication medium coupled with its public-facing audience demands more investigation from a socio-cultural perspective.

Rönkkö, Urinboyev, Svensson, Svensson, and Carlsson (2017) researched social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook and measured their effect in the workplace. These

⁴⁵ Shahjahan and Chisty 2014: 1

⁴⁶ Shahjahan and Chisty 2014: 3

⁴⁷ Pentina Basmanova and Zhang 2016

⁴⁸ Qi, Monod, Fang and Deng 2018: 96

⁴⁹ Pentina Basmanova and Zhang 2016

⁵⁰ Ngai, Taoa, and Moon 2015

researchers found that even work environments are not immune to “an organic “uncontrolled” bottom up upbringing of information flows.⁵¹ In their research, Rönkkö et al. (2017) discuss the blurred boundaries between professional and personal life that result from one’s social media profile that houses personal information and opinions. Pre-social media, individuals could easily keep their professional and personal lives separate, but now both the technology of social media and user’s application of it has changed this reality. Furthermore, “Millennials are not willing to sacrifice their multifaceted Internet participation for the sake of segregating their multiple life performances.”⁵²

The extent to which social media is integrated with day-to-day activity seems to be inescapable in every facet of our personal and professional lives. The technology of social media has been influential in how we think, act, and relate to each other shaping how we socialize.⁵³ Abeele, De Wolf, and Ling (2018) stipulate that mobile’s anytime, anywhere access imposes a network, social, and personal logic, which is affecting social organization online and off. According to these researchers, immediate connectivity alters social space and social structures. “These structures reflexively shape society at the micro-level by changing processes and routines in everyday life, and at the macro-level by supporting social change”.⁵⁴

Understanding this interplay between social media and social capital has caused social media scrutiny from academic researcher in multiple fields of study.⁵⁵ Skoric, Zhu, Goh, and Pang (2016) conducted a meta-analysis of social media research that looked at the relationship between social media use and engagement that occurs across different platforms. What they

⁵¹ Rönkkö, Urinboyev, Svensson, Svensson, and Carlsson 2017: 7

⁵² Rönkkö et al. 2017: 15

⁵³ Abeele, De Wolf, and Ling 2018

⁵⁴ Abeele, De Wolf, and Ling 2018: 6

⁵⁵ Ellison and Vitak 2015

found was that a positive relationship existed between expressive, informational and relational applications of social media and social capital. Valenzuela, Correa, and de Zúñiga's (2018) similarly measured the social implications of social media engagement. Their study showed that Twitter's weak-tie networks with more distant connections to acquaintances could be more effective than Facebook when it comes to engagement in protest activity. "Twitter's unique affordances such as the unstructured and non-reciprocal follower/followee relationship facilitate the rapid spread of novel, diverse, and relevant political information, enabling protest participation and collective action alike".⁵⁶ This ability to extend a user's reach through Twitter, in turn, affects citizen engagement, as was demonstrated in Obama's use of Twitter during his presidential campaign, where he successfully reached current supporters as well as recruited new ones.⁵⁷

Engagement on Twitter is not only marked by its 140 character limit (recently expanded to 280 characters), which makes information dissemination and consumption quick, but it is also marked through the deliberate use of hashtags which also facilitates speedy content aggregation on its topic.⁵⁸ Seeking to find patterns and factors that contribute to reach, uptake, and success of hashtags Cunha, Magno, Comarela, Almeida, Gonçalves, and Benevenuto (2011) investigated Twitter hashtag use from a linguistic perspective. What they found from their data was the shorter in length a hashtag the greater frequency with which it is adopted. Specifically, hashtags that consist of fifteen or more characters are not amongst the most commonly used. Cunha et al. (2011) parallel hashtag acceptance to linguistic innovations, which call for cultural selection by a

⁵⁶ Valenzuela, Correa, and de Zúñiga 2018: 123

⁵⁷ Bode and Dalrymple 2016

⁵⁸ Giglietto and Lee 2017

community to accept or reject the term. Caleffi (2015) echoed this in his own research findings where the most popular and well-known hashtags were found to be simple, direct and short.

Research on social movements through hashtags like #IdleNoMore, #ArabSpring, and #OccupyWallStreet show how Social media is being used to reframe mainstream news.⁵⁹

Giaxoglou (2018) defines hashtags like #JeSuisCharlie as metanarrative hashtags as they convey a storyline and more importantly create interest around topics which change the general public's traditional spectator role in news media reporting to active contributor. The use of hashtags in social movements can create resonance, where the message being broadcast vibrates in far-reaching circles, which activates a conversation around the hashtag and causes a collective identity to emerge.⁶⁰

Hashtags have a community-building capacity because they start a conversation that elicits support for action, as such hashtags are both a communicative act and a social one.⁶¹ #BlackLivesMatter demonstrates this capacity as the call to action gained national attention in the fight for racial justice.

The rise of social media has made it easier for those who are not recognized spokespersons and those with non-mainstream views, to weigh in and be heard on race-related matters. . . . the voices and varied viewpoints of Black women and young activists in particular, have become more audible.⁶²

Russell-Brown (2017) points out that social media creates a democratized space where marginalized groups and victims of crime can share their experiences and opinions. This

⁵⁹ Callison and Hermida 2015

⁶⁰ Callison and Hermida 2015

⁶¹ Johansson, Kyr  lainen, Ginter, Lehti, Krizsan, and Laippala 2018

⁶² Russell-Brown 2017: 404-405

researcher also notes that what has followed is a heightened interest by publics writ large in understanding experiences of social injustice.

Intersectional Feminism

Awareness of social injustice and the fight against gender inequality lies at the heart of feminism. “Simply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression”.⁶³ Due in part to mainstream media focus and the voices of feminism made visible over the course of its history it became polarized, predominantly along the lines of white middle-class women.⁶⁴ This has been argued for decades and became evident quite recently with the Women’s March on Washington the day after Trump’s inauguration, calling for greater solidarity and a redefinition of feminism.⁶⁵

Brewer and Dundes (2018) researched black women’s perspective of the Women’s March on Washington occurring in January 2017 and found that race-based fissures existed in this feminist movement. The data found dissatisfaction with what was perceived as a principal focus on the voices of white women; even the image of pink pussy hats as a symbol of the movement was criticized as not representing transgender or black women.

An intense discussion on what it means to be feminist also emerged in Montreal as part of an international literary event in April 2017 entitled: *Le féminisme: un passage obligé? — Feminism: a mandatory passage?*⁶⁶ What was discussed during this event was “how intersectionality alters the image of the universal woman”.⁶⁷ For example looking at beauty

⁶³ Hooks 2008: 1

⁶⁴ Hooks 2008

⁶⁵ Gökarıksel and Smith 2017

⁶⁶ Deliu and Ilea 2018

⁶⁷ Deliu and Ilea 2018: 9

through culture and gender, hegemonic feminism marks it as a sign of oppression, while black women mark it as a sign of liberation, which only underscores the reality of different feminisms.⁶⁸ The intersection between age, class, colour, culture, gender, race and sexual orientation reveals layers of experiences that need to be considered within the feminist movement.⁶⁹

Gökarıksel and Smith (2017) talk about the “newly emergent spaces, symbols, and conversations and argue that they are productive for charting a feminism that takes intersectionality seriously”.⁷⁰ This was seen on the media platform *Cientista Que Virou Mãe* which brought to life the concept of intersectionality with a woman blogging about her experiences as a Black, a Brazilian, a scientist and a mother to a daughter.⁷¹ The intersection of all these blogger’s experiences brings to light the many facets that shape the female experience.

Intersectionality calls one to question the homogeneous view of feminism and asks for an acknowledgment of the multiple identities that contribute to a woman’s experiences.

“Intersectionality proposes that gender cannot be used as a single analytic frame without also exploring how issues of race, migration status, history, and social class, in particular, come to bear on one’s experience as a woman”.⁷² Similarly, Gökarıksel, and Smith (2017) state that intersectional feminism is about “recognizes differences in terms of class, religion, race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. and in terms of power and vulnerability”,⁷³ which these researchers

⁶⁸ Deliu and Ilea 2018

⁶⁹ Medrado and Muller 2018

⁷⁰ Gökarıksel and Smith 2017: 629

⁷¹ Medrado and Muller 2018

⁷² Samuels and Ross-Sheriff 2008: 5

⁷³ Gökarıksel and Smith 2017: 639

acknowledge is no easy feat. The argument that feminism has failed to address diversity in this way has conceptualized the next wave of feminism, labeled feminisms.⁷⁴

Feminism has been undergoing something of a revival in the past few years, at least in terms of a heightened visibility in media and popular culture. Numerous high profile campaigns such as Laura Bates's *Everyday Sexism*, which encourage women to catalogue instances of sexism or discrimination they face in everyday life and has well over 230,000 followers on Twitter alone.⁷⁵

Hooks (2008) notes the strength of feminism today rests in its ability to evolve in both shape and direction.

Methodology

This case study used content analysis as prescribed by Neuendorf (2016) to objectively analyze communication forms, elements, themes and tone as demonstrated by Twitter users who participated in the #MeToo conversation within the first twenty-four hours of Milano's call to action. The use of the #MeToo hashtag on Twitter within the twenty-four-hour timeframe between October 15, 2017, to October 16, 2017, was defined by a sampling frame of 66,177 Twitter posts. Before a sample was drawn and analyzed from this population, units of analysis were defined, and a coding form and dictionary were constructed to guide objective data collection and analysis. A manifest content analysis was used to answer **RQ1** and **RQ2** where the units were categorized and counted. A latent content analysis was used to respond to **RQ3** as this research question focused on sentimental analysis.

⁷⁴ Deliu and Ilea 2018; Rivers 2017

⁷⁵ Rivers 2017: 7

Protocols for data collection for this research were established through five distinct steps: code form, code dictionary, literature review, pilot test, and data collection. The first phase was to construct a code form that was capturing data that would inform the hypothesis and research questions. Developing the code form explicitly linked the research questions with categorized units that would be identified and counted. The tool used to construct the code form was a google form which was believed to minimize entry errors.

To guide the most objective application of the code form, a code dictionary was constructed as the second step. The code dictionary defined each unit that needed to be identified and counted. These definitions endeavoured to provide clarity in using the code form and to remove personal bias from the coding process.

The third step was to ensure that a thorough literature review was conducted encompassing the fields of technological determinism, communications for social change, social media and intersectional feminism. This research built on the theoretical frameworks of mainly the first three theories and gleaned insight into the research design and methodology of published academic research in these fields. In this way, the literature review provided another layer of validity and reliability for this research.

The fourth step was to pilot the data collection process using two coders, the code form, code dictionary, and fifty randomly selected Twitter posts. Pre-pilot, coders were trained via an instructional session on how to use the code form and code dictionary in unison. After the pilot test inter-coder reliability coefficient Cohen's Kappa would be employed to decipher observed agreement and probability of agreement between coders. This step was taken to ensure inter-

coder reliability was sound before launching into data collection. Revisiting the code form, code dictionary and coder training was built into the process based on the pilot outcome.

Data collection was launched as the fifth step and set a reliability subsample of 10% to be coded by both coders that would later be assessed for agreement. This five-steps process endeavoured to remove subjectivity in identifying and measuring each unit before operationalizing data collection for this study.

Sampling

Data for this research was based on public Twitter posts containing the hashtag #MeToo within the twenty-four-hour time frame immediately following Milano's 'me too' call to action on October 15, 2017. The defined sampling frame was 66,117 Twitter posts, from which a data sample of approximately 4% was selected for analysis. Systematic sampling technique was used with a skip interval of every 23rd post to produce a probability sample of 2,797 tweets, which were analyzed to generalize findings.

Units of Analysis

Units of analysis were defined in four parts: form, elements, themes, and tone.

Form

- tweets
- retweets
- replies

Elements

- text

- emojis
- links
- hashtags other than #MeToo
- twitter handles

Topics of Discussion

- self-identifying with #MeToo as a victim of sexual harassment, assault, or abuse.
- sharing a personal story, experience, or sentiment on sexual harassment, assault, and abuse.
- sharing someone else's story, experience, or sentiment on sexual harassment, assault, and abuse.
- a call to action to encourage others to self-identify using #MeToo or a call to address the issue of sexual violence in another way.
- expressing heartfelt concern for victims
- offering support or direction to resources for those who may need it.
- expressing negativity towards perpetrators, those accused or on the issue of sexual violence.
- thanking those who self-identified using #MeToo
- mainstream media coverage on #MeToo
- other topics

Sentiment Analysis:

- positive
- negative

- neutral

A positive tone was defined as any view that demonstrated support for the #MeToo call to action. These posts responded to Milano's call to action and participated in the conversation that brought awareness to the issue of sexual harassment and violence.

A negative tone was any post that demonstrated it did not support the #MeToo call to action. A negative tone was defined as a rejection of having or supporting the discussion on sexual harassment or violence.

A neutral tone was defined by tweets that were neither for nor against the #MeToo call to action.

Reliability

The data collection instrument used for content analysis was a google form (Appendix A), which was guided by the coding dictionary (Appendix B). The researcher and one other coder coded content manually into the form and referenced the dictionary for clarity. Reliability was established by following the five-step process for data collection as explained in the methodology section. Inter-coder reliability was assessed through pre-testing data collection using fifty random Twitter posts before data analysis began. After this pilot test, inter-coder reliability coefficient Cohen's Kappa was employed to decipher observed agreement and probability of agreement between coders. This was calculated using the Kappa formula, which found the observed level of agreement at > 0.8 and the probability of agreement at > 0.713 . The calculation indicated that inter-coder reliability was sound and the next step was to ensure consistent application of the coding form and reliance on the coding dictionary to close the gap of subjectivity before deploying a full content analysis. Furthermore, a reliability subsample of 10% was set to be coded by both coders during data collection. This represented 280 Twitter posts that were selected and then coded by both coders to assess agreement. The results

calculated an 87.5% agreement between coders. This was higher than the 80% as seen in the pilot of fifty tweets, which was expected as further adjustments to the coding form and additional coder training followed the pilot.

Validity

Measurement for this research encompassed the criteria of reliability, accuracy, and precision.⁷⁶ With an aim to ensure replicability of findings the content analysis followed the five-step protocol for unbiased data collection. The code form was assessed to ensure it was capturing data that informed the hypothesis and research questions. Face validity was addressed through peer advice to ensure alignment between what was being measured and the research questions it sought to answer. The construction of the code dictionary served to eliminate personal bias when entering data into the code form. A literature review also worked to build this research from a sound theoretical foundation based on extant academic research in the fields of technological determinism, communications for social change, social media and intersectional feminism. The academic research published to date was also used by the researcher to understand the research design for these published findings.

Coder training occurred followed by a piloting of fifty tweets to test the code form and the process. After calculating observed and probable agreement based on the pilot, further adjustments were made to the form and dictionary, and another session of coder training followed. After discovering the level of agreement (observed and probable) was solid the data collection was launched using a 10% subsample overlap between coders as another mechanism to assess research validity.

⁷⁶ Neuendorf, 2016

Results

From a sampling frame of 66,117 Twitter messages posted within the first twenty-four hours of the #MeToo conversation, a sample of 2,797 tweets were analyzed. From the original sample, 51 Twitter posts were discarded as they were in different languages unknown to the researcher and hence could not be analyzed. Another 79 Twitter posts were also discarded as the hashtag was used out of context with other unrelated topics. These unrelated topics included advertising for retail websites, YouTube channels, blogs, and personal profiles and where no discernible message was evident. The researcher assumed that the popularity of the hashtag was likely leveraged to highlight other stories or to drive sales for retailers. Regardless of the reasoning, these Twitter posts were not relevant to this research and were discarded. After removing these 130 posts, the researcher randomly pulled another 130 Twitter posts from the sampling frame.

Overall, the research found that over 60% of posts were in the form of retweets and that 78% of the content contained within these posts were text-only. The majority of the conversation was in sharing stories, experiences, and feelings on the topic of sexual harassment, assault, and abuse; sharing stories was demonstrated in 73% or $n=2052$ posts (tweets, retweets, and replies). The movement also carried a positive tone with 95% of Twitter users in support of the original call to action.

RQ1: What were the communication patterns demonstrated by Twitter users who participated in the #MeToo conversation in the first twenty-four hours of the original call to action?

The first research question sought to discover how users were communicating in terms of form and elements. How the message was distributed looked at three options: tweets, retweets,

and replies. The data revealed that 28% (n=793) posts on Twitter took the form of tweets, just under 60% (n=1657) were retweets and replies were used by 12.5% (n= 347) of Twitter users using the #MeToo hashtag to engage in the discussion.

Elements contained within the body of the post looked at the use of tagging, other hashtags, emojis, links, and simple text messages. 78% (n=2191) of messages across all forms (tweets, retweets and replies) were text-only messages. 11% of all Twitter posts and 39% of all tweets (n=312) only communicated the hashtag #MeToo. 7.5% (n=206) of posts (tweets, retweets, and replies) contained other hashtags within the message. The number of posts that tagged other Twitter handles represented just under 7% (n=193). The use of emoticons or emojis saw 4.5% (n=131) use across all posts. Just under 3% (n=76) used links as part of their message.

RQ2: What topics were being discussed by Twitter users participating in the #MeToo conversation?

The second research question endeavoured to understand how conversation was forming around the #MeToo hashtag. From the sample of 2,797 Twitter posts, the data found 30% (n=843) of combined tweets and replies responded directly to Alyssa Milano's call to action. Of these 843 tweets and replies, 312 used only the #MeToo hashtag in their post to self-identify and 531 contained the hashtag along with a personal experience or feeling on the topic. Self-identifying whether solely through the #MeToo hashtag or accompanied by a shared personal story or experience represented 30% of the topics of conversation used with the hashtag on Twitter. There were 2% of tweets and retweets (n=59) that served to share personal stories, feelings or sentiments on the topic of sexual harassment and sexual violence, but these users did not self-identify.

Posts that shared someone else's personal story, experience or sentiments on sexual harassment or sexual violence represented 41% of the conversation on Twitter or n= 1150, these were in the form of retweets. 6.5% or n=181 were media feeds on the subject of #MeToo in mainstream news, entertainment media, and Twitter Moments. 7% or n=204 posts demonstrated a heartfelt concern for victims of sexual assault, harassment, and abuse. Less than 6% or n=165 expressed their thanks to those that courageously responded to the call to action, self-identified and shared their stories. Less than 4% or n= 105 were posts encouraged individuals to self-identify or to demonstrate the importance and seriousness of the issue through some other action. 2% of posts or n=60 expressed disgust or anger towards perpetrators, those accused or on the issue of sexual harassment and sexual violence. Less than 1% of posts (n=20) cited resources available to those who may require support as well as offering personal support for anyone who wanted to talk offline. Twitter Trends which were seen as tweets providing an update to its platform users on currently trending hashtags also captured the #MeToo hashtag, and this was seen in less than 0.5% (n=10) of the posts sampled.

Table 1 displays the topics of discussion that were used along with the #MeToo hashtag as posted on Twitter.

Table 1

<i>What topics were being discussed by Twitter users participating in the #MeToo conversation?</i>	
sharing someone else's personal story or experience on sexual harassment or violence	1150
sharing a personal story or experience on sexual harassment or violence	843
self-identifying with #MeToo	312
expressing heartfelt concern for victims	204
mainstream news media coverage on #MeToo	181
thanking those who self-identified and posted #MeToo	165
a call to action to self-identify or address the issue	105
expressing negativity towards perpetrators, accused or on the issue of sexual violence	60
offering support	20

other (specify)

10*

* trending hashtags update

RQ3: How did #MeToo posts split in tonality?

This research question gauged the sentiment around the movement, counting positive as being in support of the call to action for this movement, negative as against the call to action for this movement and neutral for those that were neither for nor against the call to action.

It was interesting to note no posts displayed a negative tone or negative stance against the movement while 5% or n= 139 represented neutral responses and 95% or n=2658 had a positive tonality, either answering the call to action, encouraging other to answer, or simply participating in the conversation in a way that conveyed the importance of addressing the issue of sexual violence.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the communications patterns and behaviours that emerged on Twitter within the first twenty-four hours of the #MeToo movement. Data from this research served to provide insight into which forms, content elements, topics, and tone were used to participate in the conversation and their implication in the hashtag going viral to create a social movement against sexual violence. In accordance with the hypothesis for this research, the data confirmed that frequent posting of the #MeToo hashtag on Twitter's platform was conducive of reaching broader audiences, which helped to facilitate its widespread support for social activity.

In looking at the first research question the data found that more than half of the participation in the #MeToo conversation (60% or n=1657) came in the form of retweets and the least amount through replies (12.5% or n= 347). This is interesting to note as the original call to action was to reply: “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet”.⁷⁷ Another interesting finding was that posting only #MeToo accounted for 312 posts in addition to 531 posts that wrote #MeToo along with a personal story. Combined these represented 30% of the topics of discussion used in unison with the hashtag. The most popular conversational theme was sharing other people’s stories, experience or sentiments on sexual harassment or sexual violence, which were repeatedly retweeted. According to Page (2018), retweeting is a powerful way of sharing a story as it extends beyond information dissemination and becomes a communicative practice that can serve to reinforce or contest meaning. This communicative practice was evident in the #MeToo movement on Twitter where retweeting reinforced the value of the message being shared.⁷⁸

There is a clear advantage in using Twitter to reach and mobilize publics. Page (2018) highlights the advantage of retweeting specifically in that “the conversational characteristics of the interaction are closer to one-to-many broadcasts rather than dyadic exchanges and therefore can be co-opted for various socio-political purposes such as activism”.⁷⁹

While retweeting was the most popular form used within Twitter to communicate, the communication elements contained within posts were predominantly text-only content. Posts using the #MeToo hashtag saw Twitter users make little use of the other content elements like using additional hashtags, tagging other Twitter handles, incorporating emojis, or even adding

⁷⁷ Milano 2017

⁷⁸ Van Dijck 2013

⁷⁹ Page 2018: 139

links to direct Twitter users to another web page. Text-only messages were seen in 78% or $n=2191$ of posted messages in the sample. Chen's (2011) research on Twitter user gratification found that communication behavior on Twitter is purposeful and goal-oriented "not just virtual noise of people talking".⁸⁰ It may be deduced that the addition of other elements were purposely rejected, as they added no value and perhaps even distracted from the personal stories being shared.

It is interesting to note that Milano's original post did not use a hashtag; instead, users in response to her call to action created the hashtag. This aligns with Bruns (2008) concept of *produser* where social media has removed the passivity of audiences and created an arena for active participation in further disseminating information, which in turn creates an evolution in communications as a product.



Figure 1: The 'me too' call to action that sparked #MeToo⁸¹

The Twitter community clearly accepted the #MeToo hashtag as its uptake was immediate. This may be due to its five-letter length, which aligns with research showing a

⁸⁰ Chen 2011: 760

⁸¹ Milano2017

correlation between short hashtags and their popular use.⁸² Cunha, et al. (2011) researched hashtags in the context of linguistic innovation. They found that hashtag uptake is similar to innovation in language, which is accepted through a cultural selection. This acceptance is based on a number of factors that individuals may not even be conscious of, word length being one. These researchers also relied on theories in linguistic to explain how hashtags are created and distributed and discovered:

like linguistic innovations, new hashtags are created by individuals when they feel the need to categorize their messages with a term not yet used for this purpose. This reflects the speaker's need to create a term, for example, to name an object or an action that he/she was not acquainted with in the offline world.⁸³

The creation of the #MeToo hashtag fulfilled the desire to share and read individuals' stories of sexual harassment and assault, and continued to amass stories through the continued desire to share, which empowered the hashtag to create a collective identity. In this way, #MeToo stories magnified its metanarrative, which served to reinforce and empower its meaning.

As researchers Gökarıksel and Smith (2017) note, new spaces, symbols, and conversations are productive for taking intersectional feminism seriously. The #MeToo movement certainly entered that space on Twitter, which saw retweeting personal stories alongside the hashtag take the conversation across many demographics including gender. Even though the original post was a call to action for women, the space in which the conversation emerged extended to individuals sharing their stories across all genders and identities. Similar to

⁸² Caleffi 2015; Cunha, Magno, Comarela, Almeida, Gonçalves and Benevenuto 2011.

⁸³ Cunha et al 2011: 61

Cientista Que Virou Mãe,⁸⁴ the #MeToo movement made visible the concept of intersectionality and heightened its importance in the social realm.

In looking at the topics of conversation more closely it was the sharing of personal stories, experiences, and sentiments that prevailed. While 30% (n=843) of combined tweets and replies responded directly to Alyssa Milano's call to action by self-identifying, the more significant part of the movement was seen through Twitter users sharing someone else's story 41% or n= 1150. There were also 59 posts or 2% that shared a story or feeling but did not self-identify. Combined this shows that 73% of the conversation (n= 2052) were sharing stories both personal and those of others. "Stories remain a pervasive genre that people use to make sense of themselves and the surrounding world".⁸⁵

#MeToo became a metanarrative⁸⁶, that is, a repository of all #MeToo stories that embodied a shared experience. Similar to Caleffi's (2015) findings, the #MeToo hashtag created a community of people bound by sharing and reading #MeToo content. This also aligns with Thomas's (2016b) research, which established that success in social movements comes from engagement that is motivated by shared and felt needs. This shared and felt need developed into a #MeToo community that influenced collective social movement on the issue of sexual violence.

The manner in which the hashtag was used on Twitter brought a heightened awareness to the issue of sexual harassment and sexual violence and with it prompted social action to address the issue. This is consistent with Skoric, Zhu, Goh, and Pang's (2016) study, which found a

⁸⁴ Medrado and Muller 2018

⁸⁵ Page 2018: 1

⁸⁶ Giaxoglou 2018

positive relationship between expressive interpersonal uses of social media and social capital. Messages containing #MeToo created what Callison and Hermida (2015) called resonance, in that the hashtag carried the messages into far-reaching circles, which caused a collective identity to emerge.

Storytelling is an effective practice that can bring people together through shared experiences. The key factor in the effect of the storytelling on Twitter is the hashtag assigned to the stories. Simply in its name, #MeToo signified a collective identity for all who were touched in some way by sexual harassment and or sexual violence. This research indicated that when there is an alignment between a hashtag's semantics and its metanarrative, the hashtag has the capacity to become a powerful enabler for social movement.

When examining tonality no posts were found to demonstrate a negative tone, 95% represented a positive tone showing support for the call to action to self-identify, while 5% were neutral. This lines up with previous research on how Twitter is used to disseminate information. "Twitter users post more positive tweets than negative, and that positive tweets are three times more likely to be forwarded than negative tweets"⁸⁷ In this research for every #MeToo tweet (n=793) there were two #MeToo retweets (n=1657).

It is interesting to note that the neutral responses were mostly a message of encouraging choice in self-identifying.

⁸⁷ Gruzd 2013: 42



Figure 2: #MeToo post demonstrating neutrality⁸⁸

Milano's call to action was matter-of-fact "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet".⁸⁹ The responses to the call to action were in sharing stories, experiences, and sentiments, which were also seen through matter-of-fact responses. Men were stepping forward to flag that this was not only a female issue and some tweets also noted that this is a reality for children. Figure 3 shows a tweet demonstrating both a pragmatic post on the topic and its reception as part of the #MeToo conversation, which received 2,143 retweets.

⁸⁸ Anonymous 2017

⁸⁹ Milano 2017



Figure 3: #MeToo post demonstrating inclusivity⁹⁰

This research suggests that a pragmatic call to action may result in pragmatic responses by Twitter users which can facilitate greater uptake of the hashtag and its topic through retweets. It could be this phenomenon coupled with Twitter's weak tie network (defined as a network built on more distant clusters of people, like colleagues or friends of friends)⁹¹ that created resonance.⁹² Twitter's weak-tie networks with more distant connections to acquaintances were found to be more effective in protest and collective participation.⁹³ Using Twitter's platform may

⁹⁰ Anonymous 2017

⁹¹ Valenzuela Correa and de Zúñiga 2018

⁹² Callison and Hermida 2015

⁹³ Valenzuela Correa and de Zúñiga 2018

not only be conducive to mobilizing publics to respond to social issues, but the effect could be magnified when the call to action is pragmatic in tone and hence more likely to be retweeted.

Recommendations/Further Research

Extant scholarship that frames activism within public relations scholarship should continue. Ciszek (2017) flags research on Bourdieu's concept of cultural intermediaries in the context of activism. I too would echo that activists play an important role in framing social issues through what and how they communicate and this contributes to the field of public relations in an important way. I would also echo Waisbord (2015) who claimed that framing community mobilization, as a communicative process is a much-needed area of research.

Though this research study did not focus on the topic of feminism, the researcher found that #MeToo undoubtedly contributed to concepts within the field of intersectional feminism. A movement that began as a call to women became overshadowed by the issue itself which immediately included all genders. Figure 3 demonstrated a post by a user who self-identified as queer using the pronoun she/her who posted her personal story and feelings on being raped. This post was retweeted over 2,143 times, indicating the perceived meaning and importance of #MeToo as a metanarrative.

Milano launched the call to action, and other celebrities were self-identifying and participated in the discussion too. This would have led to a reach into the fan base network of these celebrities impacting social media activity on #MeToo; hence, researching the concept of fan-celebrity Parasocial Interaction (PSI)⁹⁴ in the context of activism merits further investigation.

⁹⁴ Gong and Li 2017

Overall theories of technological determinism, social media, communications for social change, intersectional feminism, and public relations would all benefit from more research on what factors drive the retweeting of content.

Limitations

The first limitation to note is that the sample size was small considering the volume of social media posts that used the hashtag within the time period studied. Another constraint was that the data collected for content analysis did not capture pictures, which is an element that would have been incorporated into some #MeToo posts. The inability to categorize and count the use of pictures in this data analysis omits a layer of understanding with respects to the first research questions that defined content elements contained within posts.

Within the period chosen for this research (first twenty-four hours from the launch of Milano's tweet), the #MeToo hashtag moved beyond Twitter and across other popular Social Networking Sites. It would have been interesting to conduct a content analysis of Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat along with Twitter and conduct a cross-comparison of the results. Due to time constraints, the analysis remained focused on Twitter.

Conclusion

The communicative practice of retweeting defined how individuals were disseminating #MeToo posts. Though Milano started a conversation with her call to action to *reply 'me too'*, 60% of the participation on Twitter as seen from this research came in the form of retweets. The communication behavior demonstrated on Twitter was purposeful in reinforcing its message through predominantly text-only posts of #MeToo stories. The research showed that Milano sparked a conversation in a pragmatic tone, and it was carried through by Twitter users who

created and used the hashtag to not only recount their personal stories but also to ensure that other people's stories were heard. What created and empowered the hashtag that in turn fueled the movement was the collective desire to create an understanding of the issue of sexual harassment and sexual violence from multiple perspectives; and the strong alignment between the hashtag's two-word meaning and its metanarrative, moved beyond hashtag acceptance and uptake and into a desire by Twitter users to retweet #MeToo stories.

Researchers have found that user-generated content acts as digital word-of-mouth, which can influence publics.⁹⁵ Though a marketing concept used in the context of business, digital word-of-mouth gave rise to the #MeToo conversation, but it was specifically retweeting *digital word of mouth* that gave rise to the #MeToo movement. #MeToo extended beyond Twitter across many boundaries to be not only the most successful hashtag yet but arguably the most inclusive.

These findings carry implications for public relations scholarship and social media practices, regarding what causes hashtags to successfully move across virtual, geographic, and demographic boundaries. More importantly, this study suggests that hashtags can simultaneously drive local, national and global social movement that are inclusive and powerful engines of social responsibility.

⁹⁵ Benthaus Risius and Beck 2016

Appendices

Appendix A

Coding Form for #MeToo data analysis

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/17Pr8-MQWfvQEuKlfa6SCPfzbXyR-eVHd/view?usp=sharing>

Appendix B

Code Dictionary for #MeToo data analysis

https://drive.google.com/open?id=1pyjRculzzt2HaH0I_-K8hl-V2PNdXsFP

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