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# Hashtag activism and message frames among social movement organizations: Semantic network analysis and thematic analysis of Twitter during the #MeToo movement

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## ABSTRACT

During the #MeToo movement, social movement organizations (SMOs) played a crucial role in the online mobilization by utilizing various message frames and appealing hashtags during the social movement. Applying a co-creational approach and using framing as a theoretical framework, the study explored how SMOs use words and hashtags to participate in the #MeToo movement through Twitter. Based on both semantic network analysis and thematic analysis methods, findings of the study enhance literature of social movement organizations and activism as well as provide practical implications for effective social movement campaigns.

## 1. Introduction

Thousands of social movement organizations (SMOs) have advocated for various causes including endangered species, climate change, clean water, feminism, and equality, among others. Through both formal and informal communication channels, SMOs mobilize and unite individuals to pursue or resist social change (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004; Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2017). The success of such organizations is contingent upon their ability to connect with and motivate people to act. However, due to a general lack of a centralized structure and scarcity of resources, SMOs have leveraged online platforms to reach their salient publics in a cost-effective manner (Allagui & Breslow, 2016; Ihator, 2001; Martino & Lovari, 2016; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001). Indeed, advances in digital communication technologies have enabled many local social movement campaigns to break geographic boundaries to reach broad audiences. The present study examines the role SMOs play on social media platforms – specifically, Twitter – to create shared meaning with audiences in an effort to spur action during the #MeToo movement.

Research on SMOs can be traced back to public relations scholarship in the late 1980s. Grunig's (1989) situational theory, for example, outlined publics' capacity to become activist groups that might pose challenges to organizational autonomy. Consequently, much of the extant research on activist groups has been largely conducted from the corporate perspective which characterizes such groups as antagonistic at worst or organizational apologists at best. For more than two decades, public relations scholars largely ignored the strategic communication capacity of activist groups working to build support for causes among various publics. More recent efforts, however, have begun to acknowledge SMOs as a driving force for mobilization and social change (e.g., Earl, 2015; Wolf, 2018).

An emerging line of research centers around 'hashtag activism' (cf., Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Cumberbatch & Trujillo-Pagán, 2016; Jackson, 2016; Khoja-Moolji, 2015; Kim, 2013; Yang, 2016), which has been defined as the "act of fighting for or supporting a cause

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with the use of hashtags as the primary channel to raise awareness of an issue and encourage debate via social media” (Tombleson & Wolf, 2017, p. 15). Some studies have shown that hashtags function as a vehicle to create awareness and discussion, spread ideas, better affiliate individuals with a community, and integrate resources from the Internet (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Costa, Silva, Antunes, & Ribeiro, 2014; Yang, 2016). Other scholars have argued that activist organizations can facilitate policy formation, social change, and democracy (Holtzhausen, 2000; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002; Saffer, Taylor, & Yang, 2013). Hon (2016) found that activism through online platforms reflect framing processes (Hallahan, 1999) that enable activist organizations to contribute to the formation of public attitudes and beliefs around salient issues.

Given the steady rise in activism studies within the field of public relations, scholarly attempts to explore how organizations respond to and participate in social movements are necessary. In an effort to contribute to this growing body of scholarship, the main purpose of the present study is to explore how SMOs leverage hashtags as a means to (1) co-create meaning with salient publics and (2) frame relevant issues within the #MeToo movement on Twitter. We also assess whether the presence of hashtags enhances the likelihood of a message to be retweeted. In so doing, this study seeks to advance understanding of the intersections between social movements and public relations, as well as provide practical implications for SMOs seeking to engage in online conversations.

The #MeToo movement originated in 2006 with social activist Tarana Burke as an effort to support victims of sexual violence (Shugerman, 2017). After nearly a decade, the movement went viral after several high-profile celebrities brought the issue of sexual assault and violence to light. In 2017, actress Alyssa Milano revitalized the #MeToo movement on Twitter by encouraging women who experienced sexual harassment to join the movement (Brookes, 2018). As a result, thousands of women shared their stories on the social media platform using the #MeToo hashtag. As the movement garnered prominent media coverage and generated widespread social media chatter, a number of SMOs began to play a crucial role in the online mobilization socially conscious publics. In order to evaluate the extent to which these groups functioned in the context of the #MeToo movement, the present study employs both semantic network analysis and thematic analysis to identify SMOs’ message frames through strategic hashtag use.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Activism

Activism is defined as a “process by which groups of people exert pressure on organizations or other institutions to change policies, practices, or conditions the activists find problematic” (Smith, 2005, p. 5). In public relations literature, three perspectives of activism dominate: (1) considering activists as organizational antagonists (Grunig, 1989), (2) emphasizing the role of public relations professionals as activists within an organization (Holtzhausen, 2007), and (3) viewing activist organizations as co-creators of the relationships between organizations and publics (Toledano, 2016; Uysal & Yang, 2013; Yang & Taylor, 2010). Provided the scope of this study, our focus is primarily centered on the co-creational perspective. The concept of co-creational activism is traced to rhetorical perspectives. Rhetorical discourses are created through communication partners’ negotiation and further facilitate the creation of shared meaning and social capital (Saffer, 2016). From the co-creational perspective, social movements play a role of facilitating policy formation, social change, and democracy (De Moya & Bravo, 2016; Saffer et al., 2013; Uysal & Yang, 2013). Heath (2006) argued public relations practitioners could add value to society and challenge the traditional definition of parochial and utilitarian function of public relations. This formed the basis for Heath’s concept of the fully functioning society in place to make the world “a better place to live” (Heath, Waymer, & Palenchar, 2013, p. 274). Heath (2011) further asserted that public relations researchers and practitioners need to seek a more thorough understanding of how various organizations can become worthy citizens. During the #MeToo movement, SMOs and online publics both co-created the meanings of women’s rights by tweeting and retweeting their opinions and experiences about the topic.

Before elaborating on the role digital communication technologies played, it is important that we first establish the contextual parameters associated with the #MeToo movement through the lens of feminist activism.

### 2.2. Feminist activism in public relations

The primary objective of the #MeToo movement is to provide a community of support for victims of sexual assault and violence. According to the movement’s website:

In less than six months, because of the viral #metoo hashtag, a vital conversation about sexual violence has been thrust into the national dialogue. What started as local grassroots work has expanded to reach a global community of survivors from all walks of life and helped to de-stigmatize the act of surviving by highlighting the breadth and impact of a sexual violence worldwide. (<https://metoomvmt.org/>)

That victims of sexual violence face stigma in the first place is emblematic of entrenched social structures that marginalize their voices. This context firmly places the #MeToo movement within the context of feminist activism.

Criticizing the mainstream theories for their masculine assumption, feminist scholars consider gender, power, and diversity as the three core concepts to study (Aldoory, 2005; Aldoory, Reber, Berger, & Toth, 2008). In the 1960s and 1970s, the liberal and radical branches of women’s movement were booming. Liberal feminist social movements focused on fighting for equal rights, while radical feminist social movement criticized capitalism and male supremacy as the antecedents of women’s oppression in the society (Taylor & Rupp, 1993). Contemporary feminist scholarship explores how communities have fought inequality in political and societal life (Squires, 2007), sought free expression of gender identities (Honda, 2016; Naples, 2012; Taylor & Rupp, 1993), and rejected the oppression and separatism of marginalized groups (King, 2016). Emphasizing the potential power of language, some scholars urge

feminist scholarship to pay extra attention to feminist discourse and language (Elshtain, 1982; Rowbotham, 1973). More specifically, asserting “the nature and meaning of feminist discourse itself must be critical inquiries” (p. 605), Elshtain (1982) contended that it is important to analyze keywords, language, and meaning in feminist discourse. Cifani (2016) described feminist activism as a specific movement or collective action to pursue equal rights for women.

Within public relations, several studies have applied feminist approaches to examine the growing influence of women in public relations departments (Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Choi & Hon, 2002; Pompper, 2012; Toth & Grunig, 1993; Tsetsura, 2010). Others have found that female public relations practitioners have less presence in leadership positions in the public relations industry (Aldoory & Toth, 2004; Aldoory et al., 2008; O’Neil, 2003; Place & Vardeman-Winter, 2017; Wrigley, 2002) and female professionals’ struggles to maintain a work-life balance (Daymon & Surma, 2012; Hon, 2016). Few studies in public relations, however, have explored feminist activism groups’ functional role during social movements. In light of the current literature in feminist activism, this research examines how SMOs participate in the #MeToo social movement and how they express feminism and activism on Twitter.

Like other social movements, feminist movements and SMOs have benefitted from the growth of the Internet and social media platforms. Virtual networks accelerate the exchange ideas, help participants establish priorities, and identify the issues and concerns that are prominent for them (Keller, 2012; Pudrovskaya & Ferree, 2004). Therefore, it is crucial to understand how the feminist ideas, meaning, and narratives were shaped in the virtual networks.

**RQ1:** What are the words and meanings co-created by SMOs and publics in the discourse of feminism during the #MeToo movement?

### 2.3. Hashtag activism and frames of hashtags

Advances in digital technology and the rise of online communication platforms have enabled SMOs to organize with far greater efficiency for three reasons. First, social media platforms allow for rapid information exchange and dissemination beyond geographical boundaries an event or an issue can spread in minutes and hours (Kent, 2013). Second, social media platforms allow users to generate their own content, express opinions on issues, share information within personal networks, and form communities based on personal relationships, shared characteristics, and interests (Fuchs & Sandoval, 2014). Third, social media facilitate interactivity between an organization and public (Avidar, 2018) and foster socio-political discussion and participation (Fuchs & Sandoval, 2014). SMOs can utilize digital platforms to advance various purposes, such as facilitating dialogic organization-public relationships and achieving better organizational reputations (Reber & Kim, 2006; Taylor et al., 2001). In the social media era, individuals and SMOs can contribute significantly to public discourse (Van de Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004). Specifically, with regard to social justice and social change, by utilizing social media or decentralized network forms, activist groups and SMOs have played a crucial role as key actors and influencers to deepen public discourse and call for collective action (Benford & Snow, 2000). In short, horizontal coordination and open flow of information are generated among activist groups, SMOs, and the public, facilitating consensus-based decision-making about common interests (Juris, 2004).

Prior research has shown that social media users participate in online conversations around social and political issues by commenting, liking, and sharing hashtagged content (Yang, 2016). Hashtags serve as an indexing system on social media (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Chang, 2010; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012) which allows users to sift through the cacophony of voices online to identify personal relevant topics and conversations. The ability to access and participate in conversations around social and political issues has resulted in a form of ‘hashtag activism’ or, the “act of fighting for or supporting a cause with the use of hashtags as the primary channel to raise awareness of an issue and encourage debate via social media” (Tomblinson & Wolf, 2017, p. 15). The concept of hashtag activism is reflective of Jenkins’ (2006) definition of *participatory culture* which considers online interaction as a mechanism for individuals to create social support and connection with one another (Ciszek, 2013) and constitute a driving force of civic engagement (Burgess & Green, 2009). Hashtag activism as a form of participatory culture enables individual users to form groups around particular topics and events. The #MeToo movement serves as clear example.

Consequently, social media serves as a useful vehicle for nonprofit organizations and SMOs to insert themselves into relevant conversations associated with each organization’s mission. Hon (2016) suggested that “digital media technologies have ushered in a communication revolution that has fundamentally changed the nature of media and power relations among organizational and grassroots communicators” (p. 9). By engaging in conversations on social media platforms like Twitter, nonprofit organizations and SMOs become active participants in the framing of issues (Hallahan, 1999). This shift away from the media as the primary source of issue framing implies that the power to establish the salience of particular issues now rests with online users through hashtag activism.

Indeed, recent research has established the utility of applying framing as a theoretical construct to activism that takes place in the digital landscape. Weberling (2012) was among the first scholars to look at framing through a nonprofit organization’s direct interaction with constituencies. She argued that this approach was increasingly important to nonprofit organizations. Muralidharan, Rasmussen, Patterson, and Shin, (2011) compared how nonprofit organizations and media organizations used Facebook and Twitter during relief efforts following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti and found that nonprofit groups were not using social media to its full potential to involve stakeholders more effectively. Most recently, Hon’s (2016) analysis of the Million Hoodies movement demonstrated the utility of social media engagement among nonprofit and SMOs with relevant publics. She suggested that “this new brand of communicators is seizing the power of strategic message framing for engaging and motivating supporters, recruiting new followers, attempting to legitimize messages among a broader constituency, and transforming frames as circumstances call for emphases” (p. 18).

In light of extant research on the significant role nonprofit organizations and SMOs play in framing various issues through online

platforms and social media, it stands to reason that hashtags used in association with the #MeToo movement would yield useful insight into how relevant SMOs engage in this process. Therefore, we present the following research question:

**RQ2:** What frames emerge among hashtags used by SMOs participating in the #MeToo movement?

#### 2.4. Hashtags and information diffusion through co-creation

Some public relations scholars argued that retweets, like, sharing, comments are considered as the signs of public engagement in social media (Cho, Schweickart, & Haase, 2014; Lovejoy et al., 2012; Men & Tsai, 2013). More specifically, organization-public engagement in social media can be categorized into three types: *consuming* the content in social media (e.g., read the posts), *contribute* to the content (e.g., involve in discussion or commenting), and *create* user-generated posts (e.g., share contents to friends via retweet) (Tsai & Men, 2013). The interactivity between publics and organizations further facilitates organization-public relationship and public advocacy (Men & Tsai, 2014; Tsai & Men, 2018). Retweets, as a type of sharing behavior in social media, advance information dissemination in the network (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013), and is considered to be a sign of online word-of-mouth (Sun, Youn, Wu, & Kuntaraporn, 2006; Tsai & Men, 2013).

As Bennett and Segerberg (2012); Bennett & Segerberg, 2013 stated, social movement studies have shifted from analyzing “collective actions” to analyzing “connective actions,” in which the personalized messages are disseminated through the co-creation of meaning in social movements. Using hashtags in social movements is an approach to initiate connective actions. Wang, Liu, and Gao, (2016) summarized two mechanisms for the viral information dissemination of hashtags: bottom-up mechanisms and top-down mechanisms. The bottom-up process is an autonomous and self-motivated process that is driven by individuals and organizations, while the top-down mechanism is driven by content makers in media or politics, which aim at promoting information and agenda setting (Wang et al., 2016).

In the #MeToo Movement, individuals and SMOs used the bottom-up mechanism of information dissemination. Tsur and Rappoport (2012) demonstrated that the content of hashtags plays an important role in their acceptance by the community as ideas are spread. They argued that a successful hashtag should be informative, unambiguous, and not too long. Suh et al. (2010) collected 74 million tweets and analyzed the factors that impacted retweetability. They found that URLs and hashtags usage were strong indicators of retweetability. Given that hashtags allow social media users to retrieve relevant information about a particular topic (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015), we sought to explore the effects that hashtags have on the dissemination of SMOs’ tweets/information to those who are interested in the topic. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H1.** Tweets that contain more hashtags will be retweeted more frequently than those with fewer hashtags.

### 3. Method

This study employed multiple methodological approaches, including semantic network analysis, thematic analysis, and correlation test. First, semantic network analysis was used to answer RQ1 that examines words and the linguistic structure co-created by SMOs and publics in the #MeToo movement. More specifically, semantic network analysis was used to analyze the ego-network structures of “feminism.” As a type of social network analysis which examines the textual data as the unit of analysis, semantic network analysis focuses on the “overall semantic content of the social meaning” (Golob, Turkel, Kronegger, & Uzunoglu, 2018, p. 4). Semantic network analysis allows researchers to understand the most frequently mentioned symbols (Doerfel & Barnett, 1999), to identify the dynamics of conversations in social networks (Yang & Veil, 2017; Zavattaro, French, & Mohanty, 2015), and to reveal the structure of texts by measuring co-occurrences of words (Danowski, 1993; Doerfel, 1998). Semantic network analysis is an appropriate approach to understanding how meanings were co-created by SMOs in terms of feminism as it analyzes “the structure of a system based on shared meaning” (Doerfel & Barnett, 1999, p. 589). More specifically, ego-network analysis provides a network between ego (feminism-centered words: feminism, feminist, and femicide in this study) and a set of words that are directly related to the ego (Everett & Borgatti, 2005). One limitation of semantic network analysis is left out some rich and in-depth details of the texts (Yang & Veil, 2017). Schultz, Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema, Utz, and van Atteveldt, (2012) asserted that providing rich qualitative descriptions of the underlying meanings of the words is necessary to reduce the limitation of semantic network analysis. Thus, the researchers conducted further close examination of the texts through thematic analysis to better understand themes emerged from Tweets co-created by SMOs and publics in the #MeToo movement. A thematic analysis was employed to address RQ2 that explores the frames included in SMOs’ hashtags. Thematic analysis focuses on latent themes and assumes that meaning and experience are socially produced and reproduced (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Last, a correlation test was used to explore the relationship between the number of hashtags and frequency of retweets.

#### 3.1. Sampling and selection of SMOs for analysis

Given the substantial size of nonprofit organizations registered with the International Revenue Service (IRS) and the lack of complete list of SMOs, the study limited the scope of SMOs into organizations listed under the Women’s Rights and Social Services categories organized by Charity Navigator, a watchdog organization assessing the performance of nonprofit organizations. In all, 110 SMOs were listed under these categories. The study further relied on three criteria to identify the most relevant SMOs for analysis. First, organizations’ mission statements needed to specifically address issues of women’s health, well-being, and safety with regard to sexual violence or assault. Second, organizations were required to demonstrate an active Twitter presence (i.e., frequent engagement

**Table 1**

List of SMOs Included in the Study.

<i>Number of posts including #MeToo by SMO</i>		
Social Movement Organization	Twitter Handle	#MeToo Mentions
9to5 National Association of Working Women	@9to5org	23
Concerned Women for America	@cwfora	4
End Rape on Campus (EROC)	@endrapeoncampus	68
Equality Now	@equalitynow	13
Equal Rights Advocates	@equalrightsadv	58
Feminist Majority Foundation	@femmajority	11
Center for Health and Gender Equity	@genderhealth	2
International Women's Health Coalition	@intlwomen	15
Institute for Women's Policy Research	@iwpresearch	22
Madre	@madrespeaks	3
Ms. Foundation for Women	@msfoundation	35
National Coalition Against Domestic Violence	@ncadv	9
National Partnership for Women and Families	@npwf	25
Urgent Action for Women's Human Rights	@urgentact	5
US Women's Chamber	@uswcc	1
V-Day	@vday	2
Vital Voices Global Partnership	@vitalvoices	4
Futures without Violence	@withoutviolence	47
Women Employed	@womenemployed	17
Women's Law Project	@womenslawproj	6
Women's Media Center	@womensmediacnr	36
Total		<i>n</i> = 408

on the platform, high number of followers, etc.). Finally, each organization was required to have specifically referenced #MeToo in its tweets over the specified timeframe. As a result, a total of 21 (19% of the total number of SMOs identified by Charity Navigator) SMOs were selected for data analysis. A full list of SMOs examined in this study can be found in [Table 1](#).

### 3.2. Data collection procedure

Tweets were harvested using Salesforce Marketing Cloud's Social Studio technology that allows users to filter online content by keyword searches through Boolean operations (Salesforce, 2018). Once SMOs were identified, their official Twitter accounts were compiled as a source group within Social Studio. Source groups in Social Studio enable users to extract keyword-matched content from a specific set of sources (i.e., SMO Twitter handles that included #MeToo in their tweets). This function provided the researchers with the ability to capture posts that originated from each SMO account over an 83-day span (October 16, 2017 to January 7, 2018). These dates reflect two important moments in the #MeToo movement. On the afternoon of October 15, 2017, a tweet from celebrity singer Alyssa Milano signaled the starting point of the #MeToo campaign. As the conversation grew online, it took center stage during the Golden Globe awards on January 8, 2018. The current study originally included Twitter posts by relevant SMOs spanning 90 days from the original tweet by Milano but found the content that emerged during the award ceremony substantially skewed the data as SMOs disproportionately retweeted celebrities and media outlets rather than generating original content. Consequently, tweets from the award show were excluded from the final dataset.

A total of 408 tweets from SMOs were harvested using this technique. On the surface this may appear to be a rather insignificant number of tweets when compared with the entirety of the #MeToo movement. However, it is important to note that the tweets originated from SMOs and that, on average, each organization shared content using #MeToo more than 19 times over the span of 83 days. In gathering data for this project, researchers utilized Social Studio's REST-ful API bridge enabling the software to retrieve Twitter data. While the ethics of social media data collection have come into question (Zimmer & Kinder-Kurlanda, 2017), scholars have suggested that if (1) the social media platform is public, (2) the information is identifiable but not private, and (3) information gathering requires no interaction with the person(s) who posted the content, the research presumably does not constitute human subjects research (Moreno, Goni, Moreno, & Diekema, 2013).

Once the tweets were collected using Social Studio, the researchers downloaded the data into an Excel spreadsheet in order to analyze it using thematic and semantic analysis methods. Using R Studio, the number of hashtags embedded in each tweet was collected while the frequency of retweets was manually collected.

### 3.3. Data adjustment procedure

Prior to data analysis, the researchers conducted text-revision of the dataset following steps suggested by Yang, Klyueva, and Taylor, (2012) and Yang and Veil (2017). First, R Studio, an open data analysis software, was used to remove all *stop words* that provide little information, such as the date, time, conjunctions, connectives, relative adverbs, relative pronouns, prepositions, suffixes, and pronouns from the original document. In doing so, only contextually appropriate words, such as nouns, verbs, adverbs, and

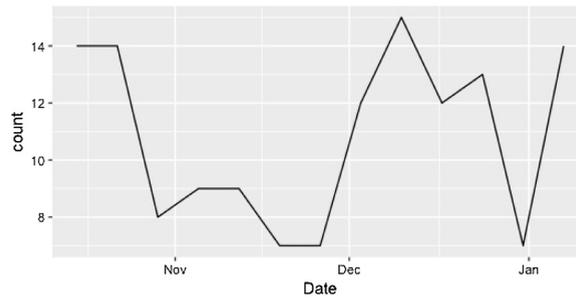


Fig. 1. The Counts of SMOs Participated in the #MeToo Campaign over Time.

adjectives remained. Links were removed from original texts. Twitter mentions and hashtags were saved as a separate document. Second, different tenses were replaced by present tense. Different expressions of the same words were collapsed as one word manually. For the purposes of this study, words that were related to “sexual” were combined with the words immediately following them in order to examine the specific meanings of using the word of “sexual” in context. For example, “sexual harassment,” “sexual assault,” “sexual violence,” and “sexual abuse” were combined as one word. After the data were cleaned and combined, the data were input into ZIPF to calculate word frequencies. The co-occurrence matrix (i.e., which words were used together in Tweets) generated from ZIPF was imported into UCINET for analysis and visualization of the networks. Developed in 2002, UCINET is a well-known software for social network analysis and sufficient for analyzing ego-centric networks (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. General description of the dataset

A total of 408 tweets were captured for data analysis. During the 83-day span (October 16, 2017 to January 7, 2018), the month of December yielded the highest number of SMOs ( $n = 17$ ) involved in the online discussion on Twitter around the #MeToo movement (Fig. 1). Fig. 2 illustrates the variation of SMOs’ message counts over time. December 6, 2017 was the date when the most SMOs tweets or retweets were disseminated. The average number of hashtags embedded in tweets was 1.8 ( $SD = .97$ ), ranging from 0 to 8.

A total of 1035 words were identified in the SMOs’ tweets. 50.24% ( $n = 520$ ) of the words appeared only once. The top five most frequently mentioned words were *women* ( $n = 164$ , 5.19%), *sexual harassment* ( $n = 69$ , 2.18%), *survivor* ( $n = 54$ , 1.70%), *movement* ( $n = 52$ , 1.65%), and *story* ( $n = 34$ , 1.08%). To examine word centralization of the entire dataset, normalized-degree centrality (NDC) was calculated. The average value of normalized-degree centrality for this network was 0.081 ( $SD = 0.18$ ), which means that the semantic association among words was not very close.

### 4.2. Ego-centered networks of feminism and emergent themes from the feminism centric network

To answer RQ1, word frequencies and NDC were calculated for each word. NDC is useful to reveal the differences across networks among words as it “allows one to compare centralities from networks with different sizes” (Yang & Veil, 2017, p. 418). In other words, NDC discloses the prominence of words in the network (Maynard, 1997). The words with higher NDC have more ties to the other words in the network and have a more central position than the words with smaller values (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Table 2 lists the NDCs for feminism-centered networks.

The analysis showed that in total, 58 words were closely related to the feminism-centered network. The network is shown in an ego-centered network (See Fig. 3). The semantic network analysis showed that, of 58 words, the top five most frequently mentioned words that reflect feminism were *Women* ( $n = 164$ , NDC = 4.29), *Sexual Harassment* ( $n = 69$ , NDC = 1.86), *Survivor* ( $n = 54$ , NDC = 1.41), *Movement* ( $n = 34$ , NDC = 1.38), and *Story* ( $n = 34$ , NDC = 0.89). The top five most frequently mentioned words in

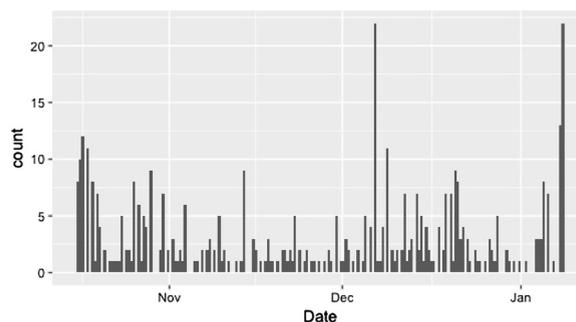


Fig. 2. The Counts of Tweets Posted and Retweeted by SMOs in the #MeToo Campaign over Time.

**Table 2**  
Descending Frequency and Normalized-Degree Centrality List of Words in the Feminism-centered Network<sup>1</sup>.

Words	Frequency	Normalized-Degree Centrality
Women	164	4.29
Sexual Harassment	69	1.86
Survivor	54	1.41
Movement	34	1.38
Story	34	0.89
Speak	30	0.81
Moment	27	0.73
Power	22	0.60
Support	21	0.57
Stand	20	0.54
Join	20	0.53
Experience	15	0.41
Brave	13	0.41
Conversation	13	0.35
Hear	12	0.33
Campaign	9	0.24
Leadership	9	0.24
Decade	8	0.22
Live	8	0.22
Me	8	0.22
White	7	0.18
Feminism	6	0.16
Found	6	0.16
March	6	0.16
Remember	6	0.16
Anita	5	0.14
Choose	5	0.14
Questions	5	0.14
Angry	4	0.10
Argentina	4	0.10
Discuss	4	0.11
Feme	4	0.11
Boss	3	0.08
Brought	3	0.08
Donate	3	0.08
Murdered	3	0.08

The words with more than 3 counts in the networks are shown in the table.

Tweets were also most frequently appeared in the feminism-centric network.

Employing thematic analysis, the study further identified emergent themes from the feminism-centric network and words co-created by both SMOs and publics, and the following themes emerged from the analysis: (1) the antecedents of the event, (2) suggested actions for women's rights, and (3) appreciation to the celebrities' leadership.

The first theme addressed the antecedents of the event. SMOs and publics diagnosed the reasons that have led to women being in oppressive situations, including cultural constraints and social structures that normalized sexual *harassment* and the unequal treatment of women in the workplace. Another theme emerged was related to suggested actions to pursue women's rights such as calling on women to be *brave* and *speak* out about the oppressive situations they had experienced before. SMOs also invited publics to *join* in local events in addition to the online conversation of #MeToo. SMOs and publics made mutual commitments to *stand* together with the survivors and *support* women in the fight for women's rights. The last theme is in regard to the appreciation to celebrities' leadership. Both SMOs and social media users expressed appreciation to the *leadership* of Tarana Burke and Anita Hill (In 1991, Anita Hill publicly accused the then-Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment) in this movement.

#### 4.3. Frames in Hashtags

RQ2 sought to identify emergent frames associated with hashtags used concurrently by SMOs and publics during the first two months of the #MeToo movement. Table 3 lists each theme, provides example hashtags that were used to encapsulate each theme, and identifies sample tweets that demonstrate each theme's strategic value. A total of six primary themes emerged from the analysis, including hashtags that were (1) directly and indirectly related to the movement, (2) references to related issues motivating the movement, (3) action-oriented, (4) event specific (i.e., recurring or singular), (5) references to victims, and (6) activist mentions. It is important to note that frequencies reported are based on the use of a single hashtag as the unit of analysis, and not on co-occurrence with other hashtags. For example, one tweet might contain multiple hashtags. A summary of each theme is provided below.

The first theme, of *movement related* hashtags was separated into two subcategories: (a) direct and (b) indirect. Direct movement related hashtags constituted various iterations of the original #MeToo hashtag. Examples included #HerToo, #UsToo,



**Table 3**  
Emergent Co-Creational Themes Among SMO Hashtag.

Theme	Description	Sample Hashtags	Sample Tweets
Movement Related (Direct) n = 50	Hashtags directly related to the specific movement	#MeToo; #Times Up; #MeTooCongress; #HerToo; #UsToo	Women are paid only 80 cents for every dollar paid to men and for women of color, the wage gap is even larger. #WhyWeWearBlack #MeToo #TIMESUP Our friends at @domesticworkers Alliance are keeping up the fight as #TIMESUP to protect working women in every occupation from sexual assault and harassment. #MeToo #MeTooWhatNext <a href="https://t.co/YGUI1KJoYA">https://t.co/YGUI1KJoYA</a>
Movement Related (Indirect) n = 5	Hashtags that reflect conversations tangentially related to the primary movement	#WhatAboutUs; #1BillionRising	Each time that I was taking it, again and again, it just felt like more of me diminishing...just getting smaller until it was just like a shell of a person. #MeToo #WhatAboutUs <a href="https://t.co/c0f3Ok93xN">https://t.co/c0f3Ok93xN</a> ' @francesfisher Rises in Solidarity at the #MeTooSurvivorsMarch in Hollywood, making a statement with her #1BillionRising tee! From the @WomensMarch to the #MeToo movement, 2017 was a year of resisting, persisting & advancing the rights of women & girls. IWHC counts down some of the year's top wins for sexual & #reprorights globally. <a href="https://t.co/MVBBXYbt1E">https://t.co/MVBBXYbt1E</a> Any company serious about addressing sexual harassment in the workplace should care about the women's leadership gap. And anyone trying to close that gap must put paid time for #caregiving at the top of their to-do list." @PaidLeaveUS #MeToo #paidleave <a href="https://t.co/Eadsr0RB2P">https://t.co/Eadsr0RB2P</a>
Related Issues n = 72	Hashtags that identified primary issues salient to the movement	#SexualHarassment; #SexualAssault; #ReproRights; #PaidLeave; #RapeCulture	From millions of women coming together for the @womensmarch, #DACAProtests, fighting to protect #Healthcare to women coming together to saying #MeToo! We made it clear that #WeWontGoBack! And we aren't done yet... #OurVoicesOurTime <a href="https://t.co/htZf54IVAg">https://t.co/htZf54IVAg</a> Ending Rape Culture Starts with Teaching Kids Consent (by @mamacooking): <a href="https://t.co/teM6jLjPcH">https://t.co/teM6jLjPcH</a> #MeToo #TeachThem <a href="https://t.co/xQSS8Hxhnb">https://t.co/xQSS8Hxhnb</a>
Action Oriented n = 34	Hashtags that promote specific actions be taken by relevant publics	#RiseResistUnite; #RiseInSolidarity; #OurVoicesOurTime; #TeachThem	Join us Nov 1 @ 3 pm EDT as #metoo fights back against #sexualharassment #WednesdayWisdom <a href="https://t.co/zA8etA07ef">https://t.co/zA8etA07ef</a> Make sure you remember to take care of yourself. You matter. #MeToo #WednesdayWisdom #SupportSurvivors <a href="https://t.co/IS1LbxhEc">https://t.co/IS1LbxhEc</a> Who's your #FeministFriday? We're all about @TaranaBurke today - thank you for giving so many women a platform and outlet to share their stories, to build community, and to create change. #SilenceBreaker #Metoo This year we've seen the #WomensMarch and #MeToo, but what's next? Help us inform and support policy debate in 2018 and beyond <a href="https://t.co/REgw60lnXB">https://t.co/REgw60lnXB</a> <a href="https://t.co/MaX2FAlwkZ">https://t.co/MaX2FAlwkZ</a> "Moore attacked me when I was a child. I did nothing to deserve his sexual attack. I was frightened by his position and his power." A 5th woman spoke out about @MooreSenate's predatory behavior today. He must be held accountable. #NoMoore #MeToo <a href="https://t.co/v27oWvhJRM">https://t.co/v27oWvhJRM</a>
Event-Specific (Recurring) n = 2	Utilizes commonly used hashtags to insert movement-related topics	#WednesdayWisdom; #FeministFriday	Plz don't believe #MeToo is always men hurting women. I was assaulted by my female partner. Doesn't make it any less real #survivorspeaks Not everyone feels safe to come forward with their experiences of sexual harassment and assault. @TIME found a way to include them on the #TimePOY cover. #SilenceBreakers #MeToo <a href="https://t.co/UL8BYRRGdi">https://t.co/UL8BYRRGdi</a>
Event-Specific (Single) n = 52	Hashtags oriented toward major events where the context of the event provided fertile ground for movement-related conversations	#GoldenGlobes; #WomensMarch; #NoMoore	' @Frances.Fisher Rises in Solidarity at the #MeTooSurvivorsMarch in Hollywood, making a statement with her #1BillionRising tee!. #MeToo #RoseArmy #FrancesFisher #UntilTheViolenceStops
Reference to Victims n = 27	Hashtags broadly address those who have been most affected by the movement	#SurvivorSpeaks; #SilenceBreakers; #Safety4Survivors	
Activist Mentions n = 34	Hashtags that address specific activists' role in the movement	#FrancesFisher; #RoseArmy; #VVLead	

(continued on next page)

Table 3 (continued)

Theme	Description	Sample Hashtags	Sample Tweets
			#RiseInSolidarity #RiseResistUnite <a href="https://t.co/cA8FUcTcrr">https://t.co/cA8FUcTcrr</a> The Indian women's media company that published this article is ran by #VVLead Fellow @shailichopra! Check out Elsa's piece! <a href="https://t.co/aESWG8h0Aw">https://t.co/aESWG8h0Aw</a>

and the number of retweet. The Pearson correlation coefficient ( $r = -.05, p > .05$ ) indicated such relationship was not found. Thus, H1 was not supported.

## 5. Discussion

While activism research in public relations is still underdeveloped, several attempts by public relations researchers have been made to advance the literature of social movements and activism for three decades. Perspectives used to understand activism and SMOs have shifted from organizational antagonists (Grunig, 1989) to co-creators and a driving force for social changes and democracy (Heath, 2011; Saffer et al., 2013; Uysal & Yang, 2013). Especially due to social media and digital communication technologies, the co-creational approach has become more useful than ever. However, far fewer academic studies have explored how SMOs co-create meanings with the public through the use of hashtags. Applying this perspective to the #MeToo movement, this study explored the words and meaning co-created by both SMOs and publics frame relevant issues within the movement on Twitter.

### 5.1. Co-creational perspective in activism

By examining the feminism-centered network, the study revealed that SMOs and publics co-created the salience of issues by using words, such as *women*, *sexual harassment*, *survivor*, *movement*, and *story* with greater prominence in the online discussion. The study also found that tweets created by both SMOs and social media users 1) diagnosed the causes of oppressive social structures constraining women's rights (e.g., sexual harassment culture, unequal treatment at workplace), 2) suggested actions to take (e.g., voice opinion or join an event), and 3) appreciated celebrities' leadership in the movement. These words and meanings were co-created by both SMOs and publics, by tweeting and retweeting messages that reflect and contribute to public discourse.

This study uses the #MeToo movement as a case study to examine the co-creation process of meanings in activism. In response to L'Etang et al. (2016) criticism that "literature on activism, both in and out of public relations, is often functional, case-based, trait based, under-theorized, and often not critical" (p. 33), Heath (2006) argued that public relations practitioners could add value to society by challenging the traditional definition of the utilitarian function of public relations. From a co-creational perspective, SMOs and publics become co-creators of meaning as both parties agree on the goals of the movement as well as the meaning and interpretation during the movement (Taylor, 2010). In addition, as Saffer (2018) argued, engagement is fundamental to activism and activists' networks, which can be seen as a holistic way that researchers consider "the relational *give-and-take* that occurs in networks of activism" (p. 285). Under the co-creational framework, online publics are no longer simply receivers of organizations' messages, but are rather actively involved in the process of information sharing and consumption (Veil, Reno, & Freihaut, 2015). The results of the current study affirm the premise that publics and SMOs are the "co-creators of meaning and communication" (Botan & Taylor, 2004, p. 652) in online social movements. By taking a co-creational approach and revealing the shared meanings between SMOs and publics, this study responds to Johnston and Taylor's (2018) call for better approaches to measure high-level tier engagement. Proposing three levels of engagement tiers—low-level tier (presence, occurrence, and manifestation), mid-level tier (understanding and connecting), and higher-level tier (action and impact), Johnston and Taylor (2018) suggested that "social awareness, acknowledgement of other, engagement in ecological system, and recognition of diverse perspectives" (p. 7) are to be considered as the measurements of higher-level of communication engagement. While the existing engagement literature heavily focuses on measuring the low-level tier of engagement (e.g., likes, shares, comments, etc.) (Lovejoy et al., 2012; Men & Tsai, 2013; Tsai & Men, 2013), this study demonstrated semantic network analysis as a tool to measure higher level of engagement between SMOs and publics.

### 5.2. Hashtag activism in social movements

Employing thematic analysis, this study identified the frames of hashtags used by SMOs in the #MeToo movement including six themes: (1) directly and indirectly related to the movement, (2) references to related issues motivating the movement, (3) action-oriented, (4) event specific (i.e., recurring or singular), (5) references to victims, and (6) activist mentions. Even though in this study we analyzed the hashtags that were used by SMOs, indeed, the creation of hashtags were the mutual efforts of both public and organizations.

While several scholarly attempts to examine the frames of hashtags in public relations with different contexts (e.g., Diulio & Arendt, 2018; Himelboim, Golan, Moon, & Suto, 2014; Sanderson, Barnes, Williamson, & Kian, 2016; Smith, 2010), there is lack of research exploring hashtag activism, especially in feminist activism. Responding to Hon's (2016) claim that "digital activism and social media framing remain a promising research area for public relations scholarship" (p. 18), this research also offers the power of

strategic hashtag framing in the #MeToo movement. The findings indicate that using hashtags facilitates the diagnostic behaviors in social movements – online users frequently referred to related issues (e.g., whom should be blamed) that mobilized the movement. Hashtags were also used for the purposes of promoting local events, identifying leading activists, and initiating actions in online activism. Hashtag activism is a form of participatory culture (Ciszek, 2013), which encourages the public to involve in civic engagement and social change (Jenkins, 2006). Within participatory culture, online users are not passive receivers of information, but active creators of meanings in social movements (Alaimo, 2015).

In addition, although recent social media frame studies tend to compare frames created by multiple players (e.g., corporations, news media, and publics) to reveal to what extent these frames are aligned or interplayed over the time (Gerken, Van der Land, & van der Meer, 2016; Schultz et al., 2012; van der Meer, Verhoeven, Beentjes, & Vliegenthart, 2014), they still failed to take co-creational frames into account. Filling this research gap, this study highlights that both SMOs and publics co-create words, meaning, and hashtag frames to achieve their shared goals—to pursue or resist social change. However, the study failed to demonstrate a positive correlation between the number of hashtags and the retweetability. Although inclusion of hashtags in tweets is considered an important factor to enhance retweetability (Suh, Hong, Pirulli, & Chi, 2010), multiple hashtags in a tweet do not necessarily lead to a higher chance for information dissemination via retweet. As previous research demonstrates, there are many other factors to increase the retweetability. For example, Suh et al. (2010) found that the number of followers and the age of Twitter accounts (Suh et al., 2010) and the attack message (Lee & Xu, 2018) also have a high correlation with retweetability. As Romero, Meeder, and Kleinberg, (2011) argue, it may be complicated to explore the relationship between the number of hashtags and diffusion of tweets via retweet as there is a significant variation in using hashtags.

### 5.3. Practical implications

The study also offers multiple practical implications for SMOs public relations practitioners and activists. First, SMOs and activist organizations need to acknowledge great potential of the Internet and social media platforms that enable an issue or event to be spread without temporal or spatial restrictions as #MeToo movement swept the world in a short period. More importantly, SMOs need to recognize that social media platforms are no longer their own properties, but a great venue both SMOs and publics exchange ideas, co-create meanings of an issue that both parties care for, and lead to facilitate social changes.

Second, as the study's thematic analyses demonstrated that SMOs and publics contributed the public discourse by covering a wide range of aspects in the #MeToo movement, from factors hindering equal rights for women to encouragement to take an action to resolve the oppressed situations, SMOs need to enrich public discourse of an issue by encouraging social media users to share various narratives. In addition, SMOs may encourage victims or members of oppressed groups to speak out and have their voice be heard. More specifically in the context of feminist activism, SMOs may strategically use hashtags to shed light on women suffering from unequal treatments in society or at workplace, mobilize oppressed groups to participate in social movements, promote specific actions (e.g., action-oriented hashtags), and organize events (e.g., event-specific hashtags). In sum, SMOs can use hashtags as a tool to empower publics.

With regard to the use of hashtags, SMOs are encouraged to design authentic and resonating hashtags to draw public attention rather than having a large number of hashtags in each tweet. It is also an entirely plausible strategy for SMOs to leverage the popularity of certain hashtags as a means to draw attention to organizational goals. For instance, SMO participation in the #MeToo movement centered around the use of contextually relevant hashtags (e.g., #MeToo, #HerToo, #TimesUp) that were closely associated with both the purpose of the movement and each SMO's mission. However, as this study's findings demonstrate, the number of hashtags embedded in a tweet does not influence retweetability although tweets with hashtags are more effective for public engagement than tweets without hashtags. As Freberg, Saling, Vidoloff, and Eosco, (2013) argued, SMOs need to be strategic in monitoring public discourse, creating genuine hashtags, and presenting consistent hashtags on Twitter rather than simply adding a number of hashtags.

## 6. Conclusion

This study examines how SMOs address feminist activism, how hashtags were used in the movement, and examine the relationship between the counts of hashtags and retweets. The results present the feminism-centered and activism-centered networks. Based on thematic analysis, seven themes for SMOs' hashtag usage were emerged. Statistical analysis shows no correlation between the counts of hashtags and retweets.

It is necessary to acknowledge that this research does have limitations. First, in this study, we only examined an 83-day span (October 16, 2017 to January 7, 2018) in the #MeToo campaign. It may not reflect the pattern for the campaign in a longer period. Second, only 21 SMO Twitter accounts were included in the analysis. These accounts mainly address issues of women's health, wellbeing, and safety. Other SMOs may have different angles in the #MeToo campaign. Future research may incorporate more SMOs whose mission is to enhance women's rights and extend the sample size by covering the entire lifespan of the movement to provide a holistic view of co-creation efforts. In addition, as organizations from different sectors or individual activists had influential roles in the online discussion of the #MeToo campaign, it is recommended for future research to take into account the impact of other organizations beyond SMOs. Third, the research only examines the Tweets in the United States. As the #MeToo campaign has expanded beyond the U.S., future studies may analyze the different message frames and hashtag usage in other countries based on cultural differences.

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