

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Twitter as a tool for social movement: An analysis of feminist activism on social media communities

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Abstract

In recent years, social media has been widely used as a tool for feminist social movements, addressing social problems such as sexual assault traumatization. This research aims at understanding how social media users utilized Twitter to describe traumatic sexual assault experiences and reasons victims chose not to disclose their experiences (Study 1), and how users became a part of the digital activism (i.e., social media movement against sexual assault) to increase social actions (Study 2). Tweets using the hashtag #WhyIDidntReport and #MeToo were extracted. Thematic analyses were used to analyze tweets across the two studies. Results from Study 1 revealed that social media victims who self-disclosed their victimization stories often reported having serious psychological impacts, a sense of helplessness, and issues with the police. Study 2 further uncovered that social media users engaged in hashtag activism through discussing views on relevant political and social issues, sharing resources to help sexual assault victims, and promoting social actions (e.g., protests, voting).

1 | INTRODUCTION

The increasing popularity of social media has led to increased social activism happening throughout social media sites (Shirky, 2011). Although some of these social actions were organized by groups, such as non-profit organizations (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012), others may be initiated by individuals or celebrities who were victims to social issues, such as the MeToo (#MeToo) movement in 2017 (Manikonda, Beigi, Liu, & Kambhampati, 2018) and #whyididntreport in 2018 (Fortin, 2018). Examining the case of sexual assault victimization, this research work aims at understanding how people disclose their sexual assault experiences and participate in this kind of feminist movement on a social media platform (i.e., Twitter).

1.1 | Disclosing sexual assault on social media

Sexual assault is an under-reported trauma that has impacts on victims' physical and mental health problems (Campbell, Greeson, Bybee, & Raja, 2008), future relationship issues (Vanzile-Tamsen, Testa, & Livingston, 2005) and revictimization (Maker, Kimmelmeier, & Peterson, 2001). The report rate is even lower if the perpetrators are people the victims know. A recent study found that two-thirds of the reported sexual assault was perpetrated by people the victims knew, such as friends and families (Krebs et al., 2016). Among these victims, only 10% of them have reported directly to authorities (Krebs et al., 2016). The low report rate may be due to the mixed consequences of self-disclosure on victims. Although some studies suggested that disclosing one's sexual assault story to a close relative figure may result in better sense of well-being and feeling of being understood (Broman-Fulks et al., 2007), other studies found that disclosing to people who may not have the aptitude to handle such situation well, such as untrained police, may result in negative outcomes (Ullman, 1996). These studies, focusing on traditional ways of self-disclosure (i.e., telling specific people their experiences), suggested that victims often struggle to disclose their experiences because of the potential negative consequences.

The rise of social media and technology has enabled victims to share their experiences with their peers or the public easily online (Gill & Orgad, 2018). Peers play an important role in supporting sexual assault victims (Li, Frieze, & Tang, 2010). However, rape culture, characterized by victim-blaming and normalization of violent acts is not only prevalent in offline environments (Gibaldi & Monk-Turner, 2017), but also highly prevalent on Twitter (Stubbs-Richardson, Rader, & Cosby, 2018) and other social media platforms (Rentschler, 2014). Therefore, social media environments can be very unsupportive and hostile rather than uplifting and empowering to victims of sexual assault (Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015). Victims of sexual harassment and assault often face criticism when sharing their stories. For example, a recent study analyzed comments found on rape survivors' tweets and revealed that over 5% of them were victim-demeaning comments (Zaleski, Gundersen, Baes, Estupinian, & Vergara, 2016). This shows that by sharing their experiences on social media, victims may be exposed to secondary victimization.

However, recent studies examining feminist social movements (e.g., actions against rape culture) on social media revealed that disclosing sexual assault experiences and discussing issues relating to sexual assault on social media communities (e.g., through the use of hashtag) might have positive effects (Keller, Mendes, & Ringrose, 2018). Through sharing on social media as a community, individuals are able to gather a legion of support from people who share concerns on the same issues (Keller et al., 2018). For example, using the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag, females voiced out on social media why they did not report their sexual assault victimizations and shared their fear of the potential emotional consequences they may suffer by reporting (Keller et al., 2018). Further interviews with some of these social media users revealed that they often felt supported and a sense of community when they used the hashtag to share their experiences and views. They also reported feeling positive effects, such as warmth, and solidarity (Keller et al., 2018).

In addition to positive effects, research has also revealed that participants felt a sense of security when sharing their stories on social media because the platform, gathering people who share similar concerns, provides victims with support and care that they may not get elsewhere (Sills et al., 2016). This sense of security, combined with positive effects that victims experience on social media communities, may explain why some feminism-related hashtags on social media, such as #metoo, are still in use after an extended period.

1.2 | Social movements on social media

A social movement is defined as "a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of shared collective identity"

(Diani, 1992, p. 8). In other words, a social movement is collective interactions based on a group of people who share common identities and views to address political or cultural conflicts. A social movement generates social action (e.g., political campaigns, petitions, protests; Diani, 1992). The ultimate goal of the actions taken in a social movement is to “promote or oppose social change either at [the] systemic or nonsystemic level” (Diani, 1992, p. 11).

In the past, social movements or social actions in the United States had been able to change various social issues. For example, in 1917, the “Silent Sentinels” protested outside the White House for women’s suffrage. Then, between the 1950s and 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement had evolved to reduce discrimination, segregation, and racial inequality. In 1969, the Stonewall Riots took action for LGBT rights. In recent years, with the introduction of social media, any individual can be an active part of a social movement by publicizing their opinions and “sharing” or “retweeting” information to a global audience. Because of this, social media activism has expanded immensely, and many social issues have since been brought to the forefront. For example, in 2013 the Black Lives Matter movement began on social media as a campaign for the African American community, fighting against violence towards African-Americans and systemic racism (Bernabo, 2019). Similarly, the Arab Spring, beginning in Tunisia in 2010, was a progression of anti-government protests and uprisings that quickly spread farther across North Africa and the Middle East through social media (McDonald, 2019; Stepanova, 2011). Such a revolution could not have been possible without the convenience of social media which allows activists to find one another, debate, plan, and communicate (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011).

Social movements that happen on social media are labeled cyberactivism (Carty & Barron, 2019) or digital activism (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Mendes & Ringrose, 2019). Some also called such social movements as hashtag activism (Xiong, Cho, & Boatwright, 2019) because of the use of hashtags to spread information and actions. Through this kind of digital activism, many neglected issues can be brought to attention. Unlike offline social movements which travel slowly across the globe, digital activism allows movements to spread beyond a small region, but globally in hours (Kent, 2013). Social media users engage in the movements in various ways, including reading and learning about the movements, performing actions that increase popularity of posts relating to the movements (i.e., liking, commenting, sharing, and retweeting), and creating their own materials (i.e., words, photos, and videos) on social media (Yang, 2016).

For example, SlutWalk, a movement to end rape culture encouraged many women across the globe to speak publicly on their experiences as survivors of rape. Through analyzing how the movement has been spread using data from eight countries, Mendes (2015) suggested that social media and the Internet played an influential role in the movement, promoting awareness and encouraging responses to rape cultures. In examining why women participated in hashtag activism, Keller et al. (2018) interviewed the female users in-depth. These women expressed that the hashtag used on social media helped them understand the issues of rape culture, learn how to advocate for the issue, and motivate them to take actions in the real world (e.g., challenging the lack of attention to rape culture in schools; Keller et al., 2018). Some also mentioned that hashtag or digital activism was more effective than traditional activism (e.g., protests) in educating them about how to participate in a social movement or activism (Keller et al., 2018). In another study, Sills et al. (2016) interviewed late adolescents and early adults who actively engaged with rape culture discussions on social media. Specifically, the interviewees expressed that social media helped raise awareness of the issue. They also appreciated how they could join the virtual social movement community and could participate in the movement by educating the public about rape culture.

Similar digital activism has also occurred outside the English world. For example, #sendeanlat (translated as “#tellyourstory” in English) was a movement in response to an attempted rape and murder case in Turkey (Ikizer, Ramírez-Esparza, & Boyd, 2018). An analysis of the hashtag revealed that immediately after the incident, people across the country did not only use the hashtag to talk about their sexual assault experiences, but they also used the hashtag to argue against traditional sexism, such as women’s responsibilities in a rape (Ikizer et al., 2018). Through social media, women could step out of the cultural constraints to educate the public about rape myths (Ikizer et al., 2018).

A popular hashtag that was spread across the globe is the #MeToo movement. MeToo was first initiated by 2006 by an African American civil rights activist Tarana Burke as part of a nonprofit project to help victims of sexual assault. (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Rodino-Colocino, 2018; Santiago & Criss, 2017). Years later on October 15, 2017, the #MeToo movement was popularized by actress Alyssa Milano after several women accused Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein of sexual harassment and assault (France, 2017; Gill & Orgad, 2018). This hashtag was used in at least 85 countries as of 2018 (Park, 2017). The hashtag has since been widely used a year after the hashtag first appeared on Twitter (Brown, 2018), continually expanding the movement's reach, message, and voice (Gill & Orgad, 2018). The movement has also evolved into other related movements, such as #ChurchToo (addressing sexual assault victims in religious communities), and #BelieveSurvivors (addressing social disbelief about women's sexual victimization). The MeToo movement has also formed the basis for the movement #WhyIDidntReport. About 1 year after the start of the #MeToo movement, social media users initiated a hashtag #WhyIDidntReport, in a response to the comment on Twitter written by President Donald Trump. He stated, "I have no doubt that, if the attack on Dr. Ford was as bad as she says, charges would have been immediately filed with local Law Enforcement Authorities by either her or her loving parents...", referencing the sexual assault charges against Judge Brett Kavanaugh (Fortin, 2018).

Research on the MeToo movement showed that users were actively engaged in activism, such as educating the public and increasing awareness. For example, in analyzing the words used by the users, researchers found that users did not only share their victimization experiences, but they also used their own or others' stories to further emphasize actions (Manikonda et al., 2018). Specifically, many users were found to use the hashtag MeToo with other activism-related hashtags and words, such as #activism, #mentalhealth (i.e., emphasizing the awareness of mental health of the victims) and "Timesup" (i.e., asking for actions or solutions to these problems immediately) (Manikonda et al., 2018). This is consistent with another recent study that showed that some contents of #MeToo tweets are action-oriented, that is, contents or hashtags that encourage public actions (e.g., #RiseResistUnited, #RiseInSolidairty, #TeachThem) (Xiong et al., 2019).

In summary, these digital movements play an important role in feminist activism. Digital movements can also help researchers to understand how people used this new form of media to discuss traumatic experiences and encourage social actions. Further, these feminist movements against sexual assault are particularly significant to researchers due to them being large-scale movements that have occurred primarily online, instigating open public discussions of traumatic experiences that often go unnoticed.

1.3 | Research questions

Therefore, the present research aims at understanding

1. how social media users choose to describe their traumatic sexual assault experiences, particularly the reasoning as to why victims had not yet disclosed their experiences after the incidents (Study 1), and
2. how tweets involving disclosure and discussions of sexual assault may promote awareness and actions as part of a sexual assault social movement (Study 2).

The current research involves two studies. Using previous research as a foundation, Study 1 aims at understanding how social media users described their traumatic experiences and why they had not yet disclosed their experiences after the incidents (Research Question 1). The hashtag #WhyIDidntReport was used. What is special about this study is that we extracted Twitter data collected within a half month of the introduction of the hashtag (late September, 2018). Also, as mentioned in the review of the hashtag activism, the #WhyIDidntReport hashtag was directly related to the current political situation (e.g., accusation against Judge Kavanaugh and public

reaction to President Trump's opinions). Therefore, this study is timely in addressing the current political climate in reactions to victims of sexual assault.

Then, Study 2 continued to examine how tweets involving the disclosure and discussions of sexual assault may become a part of the social movement to promote awareness and actions as part of a sexual assault social movement (Research Question 2). For Study 2, we included both #WhyIDidntReport and #MeToo to expand our search on how Twitter users utilized the hashtags to engage on the platform.

In summary, Study 1 focused on victims' *self-disclosure* contents and patterns in a sexual assault hashtag/digital movement. Study 2 was developed to further uncover *social action* themes of contents spread in a sexual assault hashtag movement. Each study limited its scope to only Twitter activities due to its clear and easy-to-follow ethical procedure in data use for research. Twitter generally allows Application Programming Interface (API) users to collect public data, that is, "information that users choose to share publicly" (<https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/twitter-api>). In other words, we only collected tweets made public by users who have agreed to the Twitter privacy policy (<https://twitter.com/en/privacy>) and who have agreed to the public nature of the tweets (i.e., "Twitter is public, and tweets are immediately viewable and searchable by anyone around the world."). Another advantage of Twitter is that it limits users to 280 characters, resulting in a more focused analysis. Although privacy is not a major concern in using Twitter as research data, some expressed concerns over Twitter users' general expectations of anonymity (Williams, Burnap, & Sloan, 2017). Therefore, we adopted a common practice to report summary information of the tweet contents, rather than quoting the tweets directly.

2 | STUDY 1

2.1 | Methodology

The goal of Study 1 was to examine (a) how Twitter users who were previously victims of sexual assault described their traumatic experiences on Twitter using the more recent hashtag #WhyIDidntReport, and specifically, (b) how Twitter users who were victims of sexual assault described why they did not disclose their experiences. Using TAGS v6.1 (<https://tags.hawksey.info/about/>) and Twitter API, a total of 4,697 tweets using the hashtag #WhyIDidntReport were retrieved. After removing retweets ($n = 3399$), non-English tweets ($n = 37$), tweets that did not have interpretable contents ($n = 35$), and tweets that did not involve victims' disclosure (i.e. not related to our research question, $n = 658$), the final sample that involved victims' self-disclosure was 568 tweets. Victims' self-disclosure was detected based on whether the users (a) utilized first-person pronouns (e.g. "I", "my", "me") and (b) wrote contents relating to sexual assault experiences (e.g., what happened to them or why they did not report sexual assault victimization). Only tweets that fulfilled these two criteria were included in the final sample. In the final sample, most tweets came from the US (52.2%), with the rest spread over Canada (1.8%), the United Kingdom (2.5%) and the unknown (41.0%). Average number of comments ($M = 1.08$; $SD = 7.39$; range = 0–149), shares ($M = 1.92$; $SD = 19.00$; range = 0–413), and likes ($M = 9.32$; $SD = 53.35$; range = 0–1026) indicated that these tweets retrieved in this study were discussed and circulated.

2.1.1 | Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used in this study. Thematic analysis is beneficial for identifying patterns in qualitative data, especially when the goal of the research is to extract the experiences and meanings of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In other words, thematic analysis is a "realist method" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 9) that helps to reflect the reality of the Twitter users, and how they make meaning of their experiences. Given that the goal of this study was to understand how participants described their experiences as a victim, thematic analysis is utilized.

Using thematic analysis, coding categories were created. Tweets were then coded and themes were identified based on the frequencies of the codes. Specifically, coding categories relating to Study 1 research questions were created to code the tweets. Two researchers (second and third authors) created the coding categories and coded the tweets independently. Cohen's Kappa was computed using R programming (R Core Team, 2019) and the package *psych* (Revelle, 2018). The coding between the two raters showed substantial agreement (Cohen Kappas = 0.61–0.85; McHugh, 2012). Any inconsistencies in coding were resolved by adding the expert opinion of a third person. In the end, 11 specific codes relating to how the social media users described their traumatic experiences and why they did not report were identified. The codes were fear (i.e., victims' general fear of the assault and fear of others' perception of the sexual assault), lack of support (i.e., victims' perceived lack of support from others on the sexual assault), unsuccessful report (i.e., victims reported sexual assault to friends or families but were not believed or handled), police issue (i.e., victims reported sexual assault to police but experienced issues with the police), lack of evidence (i.e., victims did not have evidence against the perpetrator and hence did not report), victimization at a young age (i.e., victimization happened at a young age), perpetration by close family, friends or partners (i.e., victimization was caused by a close family member, a friend or a romantic partner), power of perpetrator (i.e., victims' description of the authority or power of the perpetrator), self-blame (i.e. victims blaming themselves for the sexual assault), confusion or uncertainty of the situation (i.e. victims feeling unsure about whether the incidents were sexual assault), and encouraging social actions (i.e. tweets that specifically and explicitly promote public understanding using their own sexual assault experiences). Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis, codes were combined into five themes relating to victims' descriptions of their sexual assault experiences and why they did not report their traumatic experiences. When reporting the results, because gender cannot be inferred from the tweets (tweets that were included used the first-person pronoun), we used "they/them/their" when summarizing the tweets.

2.2 | Results

2.2.1 | Psychological impact

A consistent theme across the tweets was the discussion of the emotional reaction experienced in the aftermath of the sexual assault incident ($n = 478, 84.15\%$). A diverse discussion of emotional reactions was observed, focusing on fear, self-blame, and shame. Among these emotional reactions, fear was the most common emotion. It was mentioned in half of the tweets ($n = 286, 50.35\%$). The impact that victims face was best summarized by a user who tweeted the fear they face after their sexual assault experiences. Using words like "scared", the individual expressed the fear of the incident, *fear of family reactions* (i.e., fear that families and friends' actions, such as blaming the victims for the assault), *fear of not being trusted* (i.e., expressing the fear that if they told others about the sexual assault, no one would believe them), *fear of revictimization* (i.e. fear of further harm caused by the perpetrator), *fear of revenge* by the perpetrator because the perpetrator was known to the family (i.e., fear of repercussion by the perpetrator, such as the loss of relationship), and *general fear* (i.e. general fear victims feel, such as feeling embarrassed, shame and in general, the lack of courage). Self-blame was also a common psychological reaction to victimization experiences. Some users who stated they experience self-blame also mentioned that they were confused because they were not sure if they did something wrong or because the situation was ambiguous to them (e.g., occurred in a dating relationship or involved alcohol or drug).

In addition to emotional reactions, some users also mentioned suffering from mental illness. For example, one user who experienced sexual assault at a young age reported suffering from depression since then. Another user who also self-identified as a victim of sexual assault reported suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety disorder and depression since the traumatic incident. These users also linked their mental illnesses to reactions they received from people around them, such as not being believed and feeling threatened.

2.2.2 | Perpetrator-victim relations

Tweets consistently showed that some perpetrators were known to the victims and the victims' families or friends ($n = 112$, 19.72%). For example, a user alluded that the perpetrator was a close friend of the family. However, similar to many other users, the family chose to believe the close friend, rather than the victim. Some users also mentioned that when they tried to report the sexual assault incident, they were threatened by their family members because if they did report to the police, their family would suffer consequences (e.g., their siblings would be taken away).

In some cases, victims also described being threatened by the perpetrators because of the perceived power of the perpetrators ($n = 62$, 10.92%). For example, some mentioned the perpetrator knew many local police officers, others mentioned that the perpetrator was an employer, someone aggressive or violent, an esteemed member of a church, or powerful people in town.

2.2.3 | Sense of helplessness/young age

A number of tweets ($n = 119$; 20.95%) mentioned their age of the sexual assault incident. These users expressed a sense of helplessness because they were children when the sexual assault happened. Some also added that the perpetrator was much older than they were, causing them to feel too scared to report. Young age could also cause victims to feel uncertain about the situation. For example, users used words such as "frozen", "scared", and "normalized" to express that they were shocked and helpless. However, at the same time, they forced themselves to accept and to normalize the incident so that they can reduce the dissonances or sense of helplessness they felt from the incident.

2.2.4 | Difficult experiences with police

A few of the tweets also involved discussing difficulties bringing their cases to the police ($n = 42$; 7.39%). Some users discussed how the police were not willing to accept the case, such as refusing to test rape kits, delaying the time between reporting to testing the rape kits or refusing to use intercourse evidence from rape kits as evidence. Others reported that police constant questioning of the reasons they were assaulted or the reasons they delayed reporting made them feel uncomfortable.

2.2.5 | Encouraging social actions

Although we initially conducted Study 1 to understand how victims described their victimization experiences and why they did not report (i.e., victims' self-disclosure), during the coding processes, we identified some tweets that also involved explicit attempts to encourage social actions or to promote public understanding of sexual assault ($n = 10$, 1.76%). These tweets were coded as "encouraging social action" using the definition of social movements and actions put forward by Diani (1992); see the introduction for the detailed definition). Specifically, tweets were coded as relating to social action if (a) the tweets contained verbs that indicated actions (e.g., "do", "stop", "vote"), if (b) the tweets were directed outward (e.g., "you should", "everyone should"), or if (c) the tweets discussed opinions on related political issues. For example, one user explicitly asked anyone who blamed victims to stop blaming because victim-blaming was the reason why their sexual assault incident was not reported. Similarly, another user encouraged people to speak up despite the user's own experiences of being silenced. In addition to showing support for victims, another user also reminded people of their own sexual assault experiences and asked people to vote for candidates that support women.

2.3 | Summary of Study 1 findings

Study 1 examined a recent, popular hashtag used by social media users to discuss sexual assault and the trauma. Study 1 successfully identified themes relating to victims' self-disclosure of traumatic experiences. Specifically, results revealed that victims generally described their psychological impact, influences of the perpetrators, sense of helplessness and their secondary victimization by the police as reasons why they did not report their sexual victimization.

In addition, we also found that a small number of victims explicitly promoted social actions alongside with their description of sexual assault experiences. However, because Study 1 focused on analyzing victims' self-disclosure of their sexual assault experiences, not much content was revealed regarding digital activism. Further studies are needed to understand how social media platforms (e.g., Twitter) are being used to increase social awareness and promote social movements of a trauma-related, taboo topic (e.g., sexual assault).

3 | STUDY 2

3.1 | Methodology

Study 2 aims at uncovering how Twitter users used sexual assault-related hashtags to increase social awareness and promote social movements toward sexual assault. To expand our search for tweets that explicitly play a part in the digital movement, we included both the hashtag #MeToo and #WhyIDidntReport.

Methodology for Study 2 is similar to Study 1. First, tweets were retrieved using both the hashtags #MeToo and #WhyIDidntReport. Using the inclusion/exclusion criteria similar to Study 1, the initial tweets retrieved ($N = 3318$) were screened out for retweets ($n = 2262$), non-English tweets ($n = 55$), and tweets with no interpretable contents ($n = 654$). We used the same screening method as Study 1, that is, using "encouraging social action" to determine if tweets were relevant to our research question (i.e., related to social movements). Specifically, consistent with Diani's (1992) definition of social movements and action, tweets were included in Study 2 if (a) the tweets contained verbs that indicated action (e.g., "do", "stop", "vote"), if (b) the tweets are directed outward (e.g., "you should", "everyone should"), or if (c) the tweets discussed opinions relating to current political issues. The final set of tweets that were related to our research question contained 162 tweets. Most of the tweets came from the US (53%). The remaining tweets were spread over Canada (3.7%), Asia (3.1%), European countries (except the UK; 1.9%), UK (0.6%), and unknown (37.7%). Average number of comments ($M = 1.19$; $SD = 10.05$; range = 0–115), shares ($M = 3.08$; $SD = 19.47$; range = 0–221), and likes ($M = 7.07$; $SD = 42.8$; range = 0–484) were similar to tweets retrieved in Study 1.

3.1.1 | Data analysis

Coding categories were created to answer the research question: How did Twitter users use the sexual assault-related hashtags (i.e., #MeToo and #WhyIDidntReport) to increase social awareness toward sexual assault? The tweets were coded by the second and the fourth authors. Cohen's Kappa was computed using R programming (R Core Team, 2019) and the package *psych* (Revelle, 2018). The coding between the two raters was close to a perfect agreement (Cohen Kappas = 0.79–1.00; McHugh, 2012). Any inconsistencies were resolved by adding a third person expert opinion. During the coding processes, six codes were identified, including promoting social actions using victimization stories (i.e., sharing one's own victimization story to discuss current sexual assault issues), sharing resources (i.e., sharing resources for survivors or for the public to increase understanding of sexual assault), views on Ford's accusation on Kavanaugh (i.e., expressing own views on the recent sexual assault

accusation on Kavanaugh by Ford), views on other political issues (i.e., expressing own views on other political issues relating to sexual assault), views on sexual assault (i.e., expressing own nonpolitical views on sexual assault), encouraging social actions (i.e. suggesting social actions to the public to improve current problems). Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis, codes were combined into four themes relating to how social media users engage in a social movement or increase social awareness on sexual assault issues through using the hashtags #MeToo and #WhyIDidntReport on Twitter.

3.2 | Results

3.2.1 | Engaging in discussions

Many tweets involved presenting arguments or ideas in support of sexual assault victims or specifically in support of Ford on her accusation against Kavanaugh, or comments on current political or legal issues relating to sexual assault ($n = 111$; 68.52%). For example, a user asked for a reform of the court (*#CourtReform*) so that sexual perpetrators would receive a longer sentence. Another user, referencing to the Kavanaugh incident, linked sexual assault to political issues and argued that sexual assault was being muffled by people with political power.

Although the majority of the users who engaged in such discussions were in support of the movement, some users expressed opposite ideas, criticizing the movement, Ford, or democrats ($n = 8$; 4.93%). For example, one user expressed their suspicions that the democrats used Ford as a tool to gain votes in the midterm election. Others complained that the accusations were false and that the social movement might "ruin a man".

3.2.2 | Sharing resources

Half of the tweets involved sharing resources to the public, such as encouraging people to find out more information about the movement ($n = 81$; 50%). For example, some users shared blog entries and rape statistics to highlight the prevalence of sexual assault. Others shared helpful resources on how to respond to someone who came forward to report sexual assault and provided a hotline number for sexual assault victims.

3.2.3 | Proposing and encouraging actions

In addition to general discussion and sharing resources, some tweets explicitly proposed actions, such as encouraging everyone to participate in the social movement, to vote for or against someone, or to change policy ($n = 20$; 12.35%). More than half of these tweets ($n = 12$; 60% of the tweets in this category) asked the public to vote for or against certain politicians. Others suggested collective actions, such as protesting against governments across the globe that did not have a representative proportion of women. Finally, there were also users who asked the public to get educated about sexual assault issues and to be careful in words they used against sexual assault victims.

3.2.4 | Promoting social awareness using victimization stories

Similar to Study 1, users sometimes used victimization stories to promote social awareness on the seriousness of sexual assault and problems in the current society ($n = 9$; 5.56%). For example, a victim who identified herself as a "big girl" tweeted about how many people in today's society might find it difficult to believe that "heavy women" faced no issues with being harassed or assaulted. The tweet was directed to other "big girls" and "heavy women", letting them know (while

educating the public the same time) that heavy women were susceptible to facing all forms of sexual assault. Similarly, in response to victims who publicly shared their victimization experiences, a user encouraged the public to join these female victims to oppose politicians who were suspected as potential perpetrators (e.g., Kavanaugh).

3.3 | Summary of study 2 findings

Study 2 explored how Twitter users used the hashtag #MeToo and #WhyIDidntReport to increase social awareness and promote social movements toward sexual assault. We found that social media users shared resources, engaged in conversations relating to political or policy issues, and even took steps to promote social actions. All these behaviors helped to increase dialogues relating to the taboo topic of sexual assault. In addition, consistent with Study 1, social media users used their victimization stories to comment on current social situations. Finally, we also found that the average retweet was about three retweets per tweet, meaning that the number of audiences of these tweets is probably, on average, triple the initial number of audiences.

4 | DISCUSSION

From the results obtained from this multistudy research, we found that when victims shared their stories on social media, in addition to identifying themselves as victims, they also disclosed their traumatic experiences. Our research question 1 was addressed by examining tweets written by victims (identified using first-person pronouns and victimization contents of the tweets; see Section 2). These victims, who often recalled incidents that happened when they were children, shared the psychological impact (e.g., emotional distress, self-blame, or shame) and the strong sense of helplessness they experienced because of the traumatic experiences. Many also stated that the perpetrators were known to them or to their families or friends, making it challenging for them to report and to be believed. Another challenge mentioned was having issues with police, including not being believed and not being accepted as a sexual assault case.

Self-disclosure of these traumatic stories appeared to have also created an environment to bring the unspoken topic to light and to educate the public about the reality of sexual assault victims. Study 1 revealed that some users might promote social awareness of sexual assault issues by explicitly calling for public responses and actions (e.g., calling the public to refrain from blaming victims, or to vote for candidates that support women).

Study 2 followed up Study 1 to examine tweets that explicitly engaged in the digital/hashtag movements through discussions of relevant political and social issues or through suggestions to promoted social actions (see Study 2 Method for inclusion criteria of social movement-related tweets). Our findings suggested that users who actively engaged in the movement tended to share resources, express their views on political issues, and to promote certain social actions (e.g., protest and vote).

The findings of this research confirmed previous findings (e.g., Sills et al., 2016) that social media has been used as a platform that helped victims to voice out their stories and the general public to discuss sexual assault issues. The amount of victims stepping forward is forcing people to look at the magnitude and the reality of sexual assault, whether it be from the confessions written in a tweet by a friend or a political figure alike. The high frequencies in some of the themes identified in this research showed that social media has served as a platform gathering people who shared similar values and beliefs. This is consistent with previous findings that digital activism helps people to feel supported and empowered in engaging in social actions (Clark, 2016; Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Keller et al., 2018; Yang, 2016).

Our research, along with these previous studies showed that to get people involved in a social movement, the internet is a very important medium. A recent study showed that organizations have been actively involved in using social media to reflect on the progress of a social movement, define activists' role in the movement, and suggest actions to the public (Xiong et al., 2019). Our study added to the existing literature by highlighting that many users

retweet tweets that contained social movement hashtags (i.e., #WhyIDidntReport, #MeToo). Specifically, we found in both Study 1 and Study 2 that during our search, most tweets that used these hashtags were retweets, and the average retweet rate was 2 (Study 1) to 3 (Study 2). Therefore, the use of social media in a social movement can multiply the impact of the movement.

However, it is important to note that although most of the tweets analyzed were supportive of the movement, some expressed opposing ideas. This is consistent with an earlier study that found that the movement was commonly regarded as being misused, predominantly by men (Kunst, Bailey, Prendergast, & Gundersen, 2018). Our findings on victims' experiences of mistrust and self-blame were also consistent with previous studies on the public perception of rape myths and the just-world hypothesis (Rentschler, 2014; Sinclair & Bourne, 1998). Therefore, as individuals and organizations use social media to promote social actions on sexual assault issues, they may need to pay attention to the trend of the opposing voices and to be prepared to discuss openly with those opposing voices. Digital activists may also want to highlight problems of sexism, rape culture and rape myths when addressing opposing voices on this kind of feminist movement.

4.1 | Limitations

This research is not without limitations. Only English tweets with the majority of tweets originating from the US were examined. This is probably because our tweets were retrieved during the onset of the #WhyIDidntReport movement when it was not spread to other countries yet. Another reason was that #WhyIDidntReport was a hashtag initiated based on an incident in the US. Therefore, there is a need for more internationally conducted studies to compare victims' descriptions and responses on social media across cultures. In fact, when MeToo tweets were searched for without language restriction, there were more non-English tweets than English tweets. Therefore, there may be more interesting observations from non-English tweets than English tweets. This research is also limited to Twitter; thus, social media users who did not use Twitter could be not studied.

Our research could not identify the gender of the users. Therefore, we could not study how gender played a role in the movement. Recent studies still showed that rape myth and rape culture was more prominent in males than females (e.g., Barnett, Sligar, & Wang, 2018). Another recent study also revealed that females were more likely than males to use social media to discuss social problems (Şeşen & Şiker, 2019). Among social problems that these women shared, violence against women or children was the major issue the participants discussed on social media, followed by environmental problems and human right problems (Şeşen & Şiker, 2019). These studies showed that gender is an important factor to be considered when understanding feminist activism on social media.

Another related limitation is that this research's methodology was qualitative, which only allowed the experimenters to describe the phenomenon, but not to draw predictions or explanations. Qualitative study also does not allow a systematic comparison between men and women. Therefore, future studies may adopt a quantitative methodology to predict the effect of self-disclosure of traumatic experiences on social media, or to predict the effect of social media posts on a social movement. An experimental study in understanding the effect of digital/hashtag movement could also be designed to test whether being exposed to tweets that involve social movement/action contents would increase one's behavioral outcome in engaging in the social movement.

4.2 | Future studies

Despite the limitations, this research successfully identified patterns of how Twitter users described their experiences as sexual assault victims, as well as how Twitter was used to promote a digital/hashtag movement. This research also provided the academic community a snapshot of how social media is being used to discuss trauma-related, taboo social issues, such as sexual assault. As evidenced by the popularization of these feminist

hashtags, social media users are getting more comfortable with sharing these issues publicly. Research efforts can contribute to increasing our knowledge of social media behaviors. Our study revealed that some users discussed political issues in relation to a social issue; therefore, future studies may look into how social media can affect people's opinions and views on politics. In addition, many of these social media behaviors may be tied to age, as younger generations tend to use social media more than older generations (Pew Research Center, 2019). Understanding social media behaviors would also help to understand the younger generations' attitudes on political and social issues. Finally, big data research examining systematically the trend on social media is also needed in community psychology.

4.3 | Policy implications

In addition to implications to academic communities and future research, our study also offers implications on practice and policy. For example, counselors who are working with victims of sexual assault may pay attention to victims' online experiences. Positive content, such as encouraging words may help victims feel empowered. Reading other victims' stories may also help them feel a sense of community. However, negative content, such as cyberbullying and rape culture may bring trauma to the victims. Addressing victims' exposure to these contents may help prevent secondary victimization caused by negative content the victims come across online.

In addition, social media enables victims to share their experiences and opinions on taboo topics, such as sexual assault. As our findings illustrated, victims often find it difficult to disclose their experiences to their close ones. However, when victims are engaged in a community of social media users sharing similar experiences, they may be reminded that sexual assault is common and that their victimization is not their fault. Counseling services and organizations helping sexual assault victims may make use of these open discussions to promote their services and to encourage victims to seek help. Our findings indicated that many people shared useful information on Twitter, such as hotline numbers. As previous studies suggested, a sense of community and a strong social network is vital to one's motivation to overcome challenges in the real world (Altman et al., 1998; Li & Frieze, 2016; Li & Stone, 2018; Li, Frieze, Nokes-Malach, & Cheong, 2013; Mcmillan & Chavis, 1986). Therefore, building a strong community online can help victims to get help from an offline environment (i.e., getting in-person, one-on-one help), instead of relying only on an online environment (i.e., getting virtual help).

Social media may also help prevent perpetration. For example, people who read the stories of victims may be educated on different types of sexual assault and the impact of sexual assaults. Others may be reminded that with social media, victims are now empowered to voice out their victimization and bring the perpetrators to justice. Such fear of being publicly accused may make potential perpetrators think twice before acting. In fact, since the beginning of the movement, some perpetrators have stepped out to admit their actions and to apologize (Zarkov & Davis, 2018). Future studies may further understand the impact of sexual assault hashtag/digital activism on perpetrators.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflict of interests.

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