



**The hashtag heard round the world: how #MeToo did what laws did not**

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### The hashtag heard round the world: how #MeToo did what laws did not

Sexual harassment, defined as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature, (EEOC, n.d.-a) has long been a significant problem in the United States and various countries around the world (e.g., Handy, 2006; Kauppinen and Patoluoto, 2005; McDonald and Charlesworth, 1990; Merkin, 2008; Timmerman and Bajema, 1999). In the book *Sexual Harassment: Women's Hidden Occupational Hazard*, Evans (1978) reported on a "Speak out on sexual harassment" event organized in 1975 by Working Women United, a group of grassroots activists (see Baker, 2008). Evans described sexual harassment as a serious barrier to equality and emphasized the need for effective legislation. In the foreword to legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon's ground-breaking book on sexual harassment, legal theorist Thomas Emerson also pointed out that "sexual harassment of working women has been one of the most pervasive but carefully ignored features of our national life" (Emerson, in MacKinnon, 1979, p. vii). Emerson, a Yale law professor and practicing attorney, proposed that the law may "start to do something" about sexual harassment. Indeed, progress was made in 1980 when the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission released "Guidelines on Sexual Harassment" (EEOC, 1995). These guidelines identified sexual harassment as being a form of sex discrimination, as MacKinnon had pointed out, already illegal under the 16-year old Civil Rights Act of 1964.

After MacKinnon's book conceptualizing sexual harassment as a form of illegal sex discrimination and the EEOC Guidelines were released, interest in sexual harassment and greater acknowledgement of its destructive consequences increased tremendously. However, despite legislation and a bounty of research, sexual harassment remains an ongoing societal issue, particularly for working women (McDonald, 2012). Men comprise about 16% of those who file

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3 harassment complaints with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, suggesting  
4 the overwhelming majority of targets are women (EEOC, n.d., -b). Women are harassed at work,  
5 at school, in places of worship, and by men they encounter in their daily lives (e.g., street  
6 harassment). Although most harassment targets do not sue, 7,609 sexual harassment charges  
7 were filed with the EEOC in 2018, a 13.6% increase from 2017 (EEOC, n.d., -b). This figure  
8 does not include charges filed with state and local Fair Employment Agencies, which are  
9 historically nearly 50% of the EEOC charges (EEOC, n.d., -c).

19 For multiple reasons, typically less than a quarter of charges filed with the EEOC in any  
20 given year are resolved with “merit”—often years after the initial charge (EEOC, n.d., -b). Merit  
21 resolutions include such things as charges which the EEOC deemed the allegations to be  
22 meritorious, negotiated settlements, and withdrawals with benefits (EEOC, n.d., -a).  
23 Unsuccessful charges may be those for which the EEOC deemed there was insufficient evidence  
24 to determine that harassment had occurred or those that are closed for a for a number of  
25 administrative reasons, including that the charging party failed to respond to the EEOC or  
26 withdrew the charge (EEOC, n.d., -a). Unsuccessful charges do not necessarily indicate that  
27 harassment did not occur. Rather, in many cases, they reflect a male-dominated justice system  
28 that is largely unfavorable to discrimination and harassment targets (e.g., Boyd *et al.*, 2010;  
29 Chew, 2010; Chew and Kelley, 2008; Crowe, 1999; Sen, 2015). The low success rates, coupled  
30 with shame, self-blame and blame from others (De Judicibus and McCabe, 2001), retaliation,  
31 and the ostracism experienced by many who file formal charges or complain through the  
32 employer (e.g., Houle *et al.*, 2011) may work to further silence harassment targets. Many  
33 organizations have sex-based power differentials that allow harassment to continue unchecked,  
34 unpunished, and, often, unacknowledged (Uggen and Blackstone, 2004).

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3 In 2017, sexual harassment norms and power differentials were aggressively challenged  
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5 as women all over the world used social media to ‘speak out on sexual harassment,’ (i.e., Evans,  
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7 1978) telling their stories using the MeToo hashtag and encouraging millions of other women to  
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9 do so. The reaction was swift and enormous: organizations such as Amazon, Google, and Uber  
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11 experienced important consequences after allegations of sexual misconduct that had been largely  
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13 ignored were made public because of #MeToo. Since #MeToo went viral, executives who had  
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15 been protected from punishment were ousted from these and other mega-companies; legendary  
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17 public figures were arrested and charged with sex crimes; and a nominee for a U.S. Supreme  
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19 Court Justice was forced to testify in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee after allegations of  
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21 sexual assault. In a *New York Times* article, the effectiveness of #MeToo was noted by Catherine  
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23 MacKinnon, nearly forty years after her seminal work on sexual harassment law:  
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27 “The #MeToo movement is accomplishing what sexual harassment law to date has not.  
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29 This mass mobilization against sexual abuse, through an unprecedented wave of speaking  
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31 out in conventional and social media, is eroding the two biggest barriers to ending sexual  
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33 harassment in law and in life: the disbelief and trivializing dehumanization of its  
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35 victims.” (MacKinnon, 2018).  
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41 In this viewpoint article, we discuss the tremendous impact of a single tweet, #MeToo,  
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43 that began a social movement that united women worldwide in the war against sexual  
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45 harassment, the silencing of targets, and the enabling of harassers. Considering the prevalence of  
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47 sexual harassment, existing laws, and harassment targets’ very limited success when seeking  
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49 redress, we propose that the power of social media has produced results that decades of research,  
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51 laws, and organizational policies have not. Our interpretation of the power of #MeToo is based  
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53 on evidence of the widespread and swift responses to accusations of sexual assault and  
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3 harassment, and draws from communication, management, and psychology literature to propose  
4 that the #MeToo movement is changing norms surrounding the understanding of and  
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6 acceptability of sexual harassment, along with changing individual, organizational, and societal  
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8 responses to it. We consider how #MeToo is accomplishing this by first presenting research and  
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10 anecdotal information on public shaming, social influence, and changes in norms and behaviors.  
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12 Next, we introduce and describe social movements, positioning #MeToo as such a movement,  
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14 rather than simply a collection of tweets. We follow by detailing the impact of #MeToo on  
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16 exposing predators and forcing the hands of organizations that had been complicit in protecting  
17  
18 them. We also show the influence of #MeToo by describing some corporations' changes to  
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20 company policies that could contribute to silencing victims. We assert these shifts are a direct  
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22 result of #MeToo's ability to spread its message far and wide using the power of social media.  
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24 Social media users were able to turn a spotlight on the prevalence of sexual harassment, point a  
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26 finger at harassers and the organizations that shielded them, and demand accountability on a  
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28 public forum.  
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### 35 **Social media for public shaming**

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37 People use various social media for social learning, passing time, sharing problems,  
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39 information seeking, and entertainment (Quan-Haase and Young, 2010; Whiting and Williams,  
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41 2013). Facebook.com originated in 2004 as a way for college students to connect with each  
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43 other, but quickly expanded to include use by anyone with a valid email address. By July 2019,  
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45 Facebook had more than 2.38 billion monthly users worldwide (Facebook.com, n.d.). Users  
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47 create a personal profile and post texts, pictures, and videos (Cheung *et al.*, 2011; Nadkarni and  
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49 Hofmann, 2012). Instagram is a social network used primarily on mobile devices. It was  
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51 acquired by Facebook, Inc. in 2012 and by 2018 boasted more than 1 billion users worldwide  
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3 (TechCrunch, 2018). It allows users to share information through posts on their feed or stories.  
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5 Users engage with available content on Instagram by reposting it to their own profiles,  
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7 commenting, saving, or favoriting it (Dorsch, 2018). Twitter is a micro-blogging social media  
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9 platform in which users post brief updates of up to 240 characters, using a hashtag symbol (#) to  
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11 create and/or follow a particular thread (Kwak *et al.*,2010). Tweets containing the same hashtag  
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13 are grouped together so users can view all of the posts with that hashtag by clicking on it. With a  
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15 single click, individuals can also retweet and share content. Although Facebook, Instagram, and  
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17 Twitter users can limit the spread of their information by using strong privacy settings, in many  
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19 cases, tweets and posts are eventually spread to larger networks of friends and followers as a  
20  
21 result of users reposting, retweeting, and sharing content. For example, on Facebook, by  
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23 allowing “friends of friends” to see one’s posts, one’s network can grow exponentially,  
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25 particularly when those additional “friends” comment on or repost the original post to their  
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27 network, who may also re-share. In addition, social media platforms now include public features  
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29 on their apps where content from multiple users are curated for public view and dissemination.  
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35 These networking platforms have radically changed the ways in which people interact  
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37 and communicate in both online and offline contexts (McFarland and Ployhart, 2015). Social  
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39 media users have proven quite successful in bringing attention to and encouraging sanctions  
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41 against antisocial on- and offline behaviors. In many cases, the heightened attention online to  
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43 individuals’ antisocial behaviors has resulted in loss of employment or other punitive  
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45 consequences. Researchers have posited that public shaming via social media is a natural  
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47 progression in a long history of public shaming in offline contexts. Citing cases in which  
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49 criminal offenders were required to wear signs in public and instances in which parents required  
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51 disobedient or misbehaving children to post embarrassing photos or statuses on Facebook,  
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3 Goldman (2015) suggests public shaming communicates to the offender that his or her behavior  
4 is contrary to accepted societal norms. This shaming can serve as a deterrent to reoffending for  
5 the offender and as a deterrent to engaging in such behaviors for those who witness the shaming  
6 of the offender. One researcher uses the phrase “naming and shaming” to describe social media  
7 campaigns against “manspreading,” a word given to describe instances in which men take up  
8 multiple seats on public transportation by sitting with their legs open (Jane, 2017, p. 460);  
9 another researcher details an “outrage culture” that has emerged via social media to allow users  
10 to passively indicate that they do not support certain antisocial behaviors (Gallardo, 2017,  
11 p.727). These examples show how social media users use the platform to speak out against a  
12 phenomenon they want to end or of which they want to communicate their disapproval. As  
13 described in the literature, public shaming through social media involves three consecutive  
14 phases. First, users document the antisocial or offensive behavior, at times exposing the  
15 perpetrator. As more and more users make posts or participate in other ways of joining the  
16 conversation around the issue (retweeting, sharing, following, liking or favoriting, for example),  
17 a picture of collective sentiment around the issue emerges (Hess and Waller, 2014). As attention  
18 to the issue grows, the effect can move offline and into the offender’s personal life, resulting in  
19 social ostracism, job loss, and, sometimes, legal action (Gallardo, 2017; Hess and Waller, 2014).

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This research reinforces the idea that social media is a potent tool for communicating a  
society’s expectations about acceptable behavior in a variety of contexts. By repeatedly sharing,  
commenting on, and writing about these instances, social media users are able to call for action  
to be taken against offenders. Outside of research, countless popular press articles reinforce this  
assertion, describing myriad situations in which individuals’ racist, sexist, heterosexist, or other  
antisocial behaviors or statements resulted in consequences for the offender. The coverage of the

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3 events by news organizations almost always includes a mention of the response of social media  
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5 users, further reinforcing social networking platforms' use in communicating norms of  
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7 acceptability. In one example, a reporter described how Twitter and Facebook users exposed a  
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9 racist, sexist comment about then First Lady Michelle Obama made by Lisa Greenwood, which  
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11 led to Greenwood's termination by her employer (Davis, 2016). At the time of her post,  
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13 Greenwood was an employee of Home Point Financial, and used Twitter to disparage Mrs.  
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15 Obama. Numerous people tweeted critical responses to Greenwood's post and used social media  
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17 to find out where she worked. People then tweeted Home Point Financial, asking whether they  
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19 would continue to employ a racist (Davis, 2016; The Grio, 2016). After numerous critical tweets  
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21 and news articles describing the controversy, the company responded, also on Twitter, writing:  
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23 "the individual who made reprehensible comments regarding last night's speech by the First  
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25 Lady is no longer employed with Home Point Financial. Home Point Financial does not agree  
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27 with nor condone such comments, which were made on the individual's Twitter account. We  
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29 hold true to our We Care philosophy – our responsibilities extend beyond the workplace and into  
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31 our communities."  
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38 In the summer of 2018, other instances of social media shaming dominated the news  
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40 landscape with an additional twist: offenders were given alliterative nicknames that further  
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42 enhanced the shaming while highlighting the absurdity of the actions of the offenders. "Pool  
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44 Patrol Paula," "BBQ Becky," "Permit Patty," and "Hallway Hilary" were all publicly shamed for  
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46 weeks after being filmed acting in ways that social media users claimed offered poignant  
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48 examples of a trend in which white people call the police on black people who are simply going  
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50 about their lives. Each of the videos were viewed millions of times across social and traditional  
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52 media platforms, including in news broadcasts. Pool Patrol Paula called the police on a pool-goer  
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3 who had been invited to a neighborhood pool by a friend who lived in the neighborhood. The  
4 woman repeatedly told the teen he had to leave, began to use profanity and slurs, and eventually  
5 attempted to forcefully remove him from the property. “Paula” was eventually fined \$1000 for  
6 the incident. She was also fired from her job (Lapin, 2018; Mervosh, 2018). BBQ Becky called  
7 the police on picnickers whom she claimed were breaking the rules of a local park by grilling in  
8 an unauthorized area. In the video, she can be seen arguing with members of a family that had  
9 gathered for a barbecue (Holson, 2018). “Becky’s” video was viewed millions of times and even  
10 parodied on a nation-wide broadcast of “Saturday Night Live” (de Guzman, 2018). According to  
11 reports, Permit Patty appeared to call the police on a child who was selling water bottles outside  
12 on a hot day to fund a trip to Disneyland. In the video, “Patty” can be seen arguing with the  
13 child’s mother before walking away with her phone to her ear. The girl’s mother followed Patty  
14 down the street, capturing Patty saying into the phone, “illegally selling water without a permit”  
15 (Rosenblatt, 2018). After the incident, Patty resigned from her position as CEO of a company she  
16 founded, and, in response to the backlash, several organizations that had worked with her  
17 announced they had severed ties with her company (Chokshi, 2018). Hilary blocked a  
18 man’s entry to his apartment building, repeatedly asking him whether he lived there and  
19 demanding he show her his key. In the video, “Hilary” can be seen following the man onto the  
20 elevator and to the door of his apartment, still demanding he identify himself. She later called the  
21 police, who eventually knocked on the man’s door and told him that Hilary had asked them to  
22 come because he had made her “uncomfortable.” The recording was viewed more than 9 million  
23 times on Facebook after the man posted it on his page. The recording was also featured in online  
24 news stories and replayed on television. Following the controversy, the woman’s employer fired  
25 her, releasing a statement that read, in part, “[This apartment company] is a minority-owned  
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3 company that consists of employees and residents from many racial backgrounds. We are proud  
4 of this fact and do not and never will stand for racism or racial profiling at our company”

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8 (Gomez, 2018).

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10 In these and numerous other examples, social media worked to expose bigotry, creating a  
11 virtually permanent record of such behavior and at times forcing employers to take action. Often,  
12 the behaviors of the offenders, while generally frowned-upon, were not illegal (unlike workplace  
13 sexual harassment). The serious and potentially long-term financial ramifications (e.g., job loss)  
14 faced by some of the offenders show just how effective social media can be in exposing and  
15 curbing displays of bigotry.  
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#### 24 **Social media for social influence**

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26 Using social influence to alter prejudice-related behavior is effective (Zitek and Hebl,  
27 2007). As the number of social media users continues to increase, understanding the effect of  
28 social media as a tool of influence may have far-reaching implications. Outside of social media,  
29 there are numerous examples of the ways in which social influence affects attitudes and  
30 behavior. Gallup polls over the years have shown increasing tolerance for gay and lesbian  
31 relationships with 67 % of Americans in 2018 polled supporting same-sex marriage compared to  
32 27% in 1996 (McCarthy, 2018). Support of equal employment opportunity for gay and lesbian  
33 job seekers has also increased (Zitek and Hebl, 2007). Prior research also suggests that  
34 discrimination against gay and lesbian applicants is mitigated when sexual orientation  
35 antidiscrimination legislation is present (Barron and Hebl, 2013; Tilcsik, 2011). Similarly,  
36 evidence of the effect that social influence has on attitudes can be inferred from the generally  
37 accepted social norm among study participants that prejudice should not be displayed towards  
38 Blacks (Crandall, *et al.*, 2002), most likely resulting from the visibility of civil rights advocates  
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3 and federal legislation designed to protect racial minorities. For example, while 4% of Whites  
4 approved of Black-White marriages in 1958, by 2013, 84% of Whites approved (Newport,  
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6 2013).  
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10       Researchers have long recognized how social or group influence affects individuals'  
11 behavior and their degree of conformity. Many early studies (Asch, 1951; Bovard, 1951; Deutsch  
12 and Gerard, 1955) demonstrate how conformity to perceived norms is influenced by the  
13  
14 perceived size of the social group, the degree to which individuals perceive that their behavior  
15 cannot be attributed to them, or the perceived pressure individuals believe is exerted from group  
16  
17 members. Often this mimicked behavior stems from the observed behavior of others when the  
18  
19 appropriate behavior is ambiguous or unknown to them (Bandura, 1986). Group identity also  
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21 plays a role with research suggesting that social networks can reinforce positive (Hibbard, 1985;  
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23 House *et al.*, 1988) and negative (Donohew *et al.*, 1999; Dorsey, *et al.*, 1999) behavior with  
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25 individuals seeking a sense of belonging to similar others (Christensen, *et al.*, 2004).  
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33       Early research identified two important mechanisms through which social influence  
34 occurs. Normative social influence causes individuals to modify their behavior in order to fit in,  
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36 meet group members' expectations, and avoid being punished or ostracized (Deutsch and Gerard,  
37  
38 1955), even though they have not privately accepted the normative standards that underlie their  
39  
40 public behavior (Campbell and Fairey, 1989). Informational social influence occurs when  
41  
42 individuals process information from others regarding normative standards as being accurate  
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44 (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955). As a result, individuals accept those standards genuinely, thereby  
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46 adopting associated normative behaviors long-term and exhibiting them in both public and  
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48 private (Campbell and Fairey, 1989; Zitek and Hebl, 2007).  
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Individuals are mostly influenced by direct contact with their physical and social environment (Bandura, 2001). Applying social cognitive theory to mass communication processes, Bandura (2001) discussed how behavior modification occurs through vicarious experience presented in media. Along with other types of social influence (i.e. legislation, peer pressure, corporate policy), we contend that individuals are also influenced by observing and engaging with social media. As the impact that media and technology has on society increases, their role in shaping public consciousness through electronic acculturation becomes greater (Bandura, 2001). As a result, this symbolic environment is a model for behavior in the same way as one's immediate environment to shape people's conceptions of social reality (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976). The extent to which individuals believe their behaviors will be socially sanctioned or produce favorable outcomes, and how strongly they identify with models of the behavior are some determining factors for deciding to engage in observed activities (Bandura, 2001; Tankard and Paluck, 2016).

When individuals observe social media posts and traffic regarding #MeToo, they may perceive this as evidence of behavior modification occurring among other social media users. Their belief regarding to what degree their behavior will be socially sanctioned on the media platform, and how strongly they identify with other social media users posting #MeToo relevant content will determine their decision to change their own behavior. Also, any benefits of their new behavior will be considered after observing other social media users who are seemingly adopting new attitudes and discarding old ones based on their actions and statements made through social media outlets. Additionally, the characteristics of the model(s)—the person(s) who are posting #MeToo content—will influence others to change their behavior. Models who are deemed prestigious or familiar to targets have greater influence on prompting new behavior

(Bandura, 2001). Information from messengers who are considered reliable, trustworthy, and competent will be better received and have a greater influence on individuals' willingness to accept new normative standards (Cuddy, 2015). Celebrities or social media influencers participating in the online #MeToo movement will be models for individuals who follow them. Research has shown that celebrities can be effective in influencing consumer behavior and communicating important health-related information through various mechanisms (Basil, 1996; Hoffman and Tan, 2015; Knoll and Matthes, 2017). Similar to Basil's (1996) argument that celebrity effect on individuals' behaviors is mediated by identification, we contend that some people change their sexual harassment attitudes and behavior due to their identification. In addition, the number of connections that individuals have in their network who post #MeToo related content will positively affect their change in behavior, as the influence of models strengthens as their visible quantity increases (Perry and Bussey, 1979).

When the models for changing behavior are strangers or people who are not linked to individuals' social network directly, individuals are more likely to be influenced by normative mechanisms, changing their behavior in order to be liked and accepted or avoid social censure (Zitek and Hebl, 2007). This results in short-lived changes in behavior. On the other hand, when personal connections, in-person relationships, celebrity personalities, subject matter experts or authority figures serving as models are in users' reference groups, users are more likely to be affected by informational social influence, processing and trusting the information received (see Tankard and Paluck, 2016). This results in new attitude formation and lasting behaviors.

Although imperfect, social media has a catalyzing effect on information processing and behavior modification that legislation and corporate policies lack. Thus, we contend that #MeToo is

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3 currently helping suppress sexual harassment behavior and changing attitudes of individuals  
4 through social media.  
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### 7 **#MeToo: the movement**

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10 As mentioned earlier, Catherine MacKinnon is credited with identifying sexual  
11 harassment as a form of sex discrimination (Sapiro, 2018). Thus, her *New York Times* article  
12 entitled “#MeToo has done what the law could not” speaks volumes about the efficacy of the  
13 #MeToo movement (MacKinnon, 2018), emphasizing the power that social movements can  
14 harness. In the United States, the Civil Rights Movement, the Women’s Movement, and the Gay  
15 Rights Movement are well-known social movements through which, by mass mobilization,  
16 marginalized groups sought and obtained many long-denied, basic rights.  
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26 Social movement literature describes social movements in various ways, taking into  
27 account variables such as motivations of social movement actors, particular actions of social  
28 movement participants, whether policy changes are a target of the actions of groups, or whether  
29 the group’s focus is solely on societal changes. Research also analyzes whether or not groups are  
30 formally mobilized, whether they have leaders or an organizational structure, and the ways in  
31 which groups communicate their messages through traditional and alternate forms of mass  
32 media. The lack of consensus on exactly what constitutes a social movement might be  
33 considered the consensus: Downing (2008) states, “more than any social phenomena, social  
34 movements and their media are often fluctuating and transitory and thus especially resistant to  
35 ironclad theorizing” (p. 42). Despite this, there are some overarching themes of social movement  
36 research, with most scholars agreeing that social movements are, at minimum, collectives of  
37 individuals who rally behind a cause in favor of some aspect of social change (Hilgartner and  
38 Bosk, 1988; Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy and Zald, 1977). These collectives of individuals generally  
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3 must interact with the media in a purposeful way in order to gain attention and support for their  
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5 cause and to spread their message across wide and varied audiences (Gamson and Wolfsfeld  
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7 1993). Because social movements have traditionally been dependent on mainstream forms of  
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9 mass media (e.g., television, print news), they have traditionally been vulnerable to framing,  
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11 editorial policy, news routines, political ideology and other external factors.  
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15 As discussed earlier, the rise of the social media and social networking platforms that  
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17 allow users to create and share messages with large audiences means social movements have  
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19 been able to gain large followings without needing to rely on traditional forms of mass media.  
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21 Today, social media is a powerful tool in the repertoire of social movement organizers and  
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23 activists, who have leveraged the ease of communicating to large audiences that social media  
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25 affords to draw supporters and gain widespread attention for various causes, enable identity,  
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27 activate agency, foster voice, cohere communities, and catalyze purpose (Harlow, 2012; Kidd  
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29 and McIntosh, 2016). Because social movements that capitalize on social media are able to  
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31 circumvent traditional forms of mass media, they can often control the narrative about and the  
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33 proposed solution to the social issue and communicate the social norms regarding the issue. The  
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35 #MeToo movement is such a movement. Borne of the internet, the movement quickly became a  
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37 collective of like-minded individuals who rallied online, using the hashtag #MeToo to  
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39 communicate to mass audiences the magnitude of a widespread social problem that had been  
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41 selectively covered by traditional media. For example, McDonald and Charlesworth (2013)  
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43 examined traditional text media articles in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the  
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45 United States, finding narrow representations of sexual harassment, with a disproportionate focus  
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47 on legislators, senior officials, and managers perpetrating harassment against professional  
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49 women. Overtly sexualized and salacious conduct were overemphasized, and stories suggested  
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3 sexual harassment was an individualized problem rather than a systemic issue symptomatic of  
4 societal gender inequality and discrimination. As a social media driven social movement, the  
5 narrative about #MeToo reflects the more diverse constituents who control the narrative.  
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10 The phrase “Me Too” is attributed to Tarana Burke, who in 2007 created a non-profit  
11 organization to help victims of sexual harassment and assault (Garcia, 2017). A decade later, the  
12 #MeToo movement took the world by storm by bringing the problem of sexual harassment to the  
13 forefront of the national conversation. Spurred by a tweet posted by actress Alyssa Milano  
14 sharing her story and asking others to share theirs using the hashtag “#MeToo,” the #MeToo  
15 movement exploded (Milano, 2017; Ohlheiser, 2018). Users from all over the world used the  
16 hashtag in social media posts to share their experiences of sexual harassment and abuse at work  
17 and in their everyday lives. As the movement gained traction, the response to reports of  
18 egregious sexual harassment and assault by corporate executives, film producers, and politicians  
19 began to give a sense of the magnitude of the problem and confirmed that sexual harassment is a  
20 significant, widespread problem. Rather than simply tweets sharing experiences of harassment,  
21 #MeToo is a social movement—a collective challenge to the status quo in which sexual  
22 harassment is normalized and accepted. The swift and strong response clearly demonstrates  
23 sexual harassment could no longer be ignored.  
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42 Less than two weeks after Milano’s initial tweet, #MeToo had reached 85 countries, with  
43 1.7 million tweets using the hashtag (Park, 2017). According to the Pew Research Center, the  
44 #MeToo hashtag had been used more than 19 million times on Twitter by October 2018  
45 (Anderson and Toor, 2018). The movement gained attention in mainstream media as well, with  
46 articles, reports and exposés dominating news cycles for months. *Time Magazine* collectively  
47 named “#MeToo Silence Breakers” its 2017 “Person of the Year” for their efforts to expose  
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sexual harassment and predation (Zacharek *et al.*, 2017). The *Time* spread featured public figures such as Oregon senator Sarah Gelser, singer-songwriter Taylor Swift, and actresses Ashley Judd, Alyssa Milano, and Rose McGowan, along with countless everyday people like farmworkers, hotel employees, and activists who spoke out. These traditional news outlets such as *Time* and *New York Times* have both online and hard-copy presences, reaching those who solely or primarily use social media and those who solely or primarily read traditional outlets. This combination of news sources spreads the #MeToo message to myriad readers across the demographic spectrum, including many who had been harassed and silenced decades earlier (e.g., Evans, 1978; Gutek, 1996; Sapiro, 2018)

### **#MeToo: heard round the world**

The impact of the #MeToo movement was swift and compelling. As the hashtag spread, accounts of sexual harassment and assault at the hands of powerful figures populated social media platforms and news headlines. The movement's expansion followed the timeline outlined earlier, as women around the world "named and shamed" the accused and social media users were able to voice their collective sentiment using their personal accounts. As perpetrators were exposed for their actions, many were almost immediately impacted. For example, Susan Fowler, a former software engineer for international ride-sharing service Uber, published a lengthy piece on her blog detailing instances of sexism and sexual harassment that she had experienced while working for the company. Fowler's account detailed her attempts to resolve the issue through internal channels, by documenting the events and reporting them to the company's human resources department (Fowler, 2017; Tejada, 2018). Fowler claimed in her blog post that her repeated reports to HR went uninvestigated and that she eventually faced retaliation by being assigned to another team within the organization. Once Fowler's story became public, Uber's

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3 executive board was forced to react. As the hashtag #DeleteUber began trending on social media  
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5 and news organizations turned the national spotlight to the allegations and the company's  
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7 response, Uber CEO and cofounder Travis Kalanick announced he would take a leave of absence  
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9 and the company hired former U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder to head an internal  
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11 investigation into Fowler's charges (Tejada, 2018). As part of the investigation, the company  
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13 also created an anonymous hotline for employees to report instances of harassment and  
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15 discrimination. News reports revealed over 200 complaints were called into the hotline, which  
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17 ultimately resulted in the termination of more than 20 employees. As these events were  
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19 unfolding, Uber lost about 15 percent of its share of the ride-sharing market to its biggest  
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21 competitor, Lyft (della Cava, 2017; Fowler, 2017; Solon, 2017).  
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26 In October 2017, the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* released an investigative report  
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28 detailing instances of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and rape of more than 80 women by  
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30 Harvey Weinstein, a prominent Hollywood film producer (Kantor and Twohey, 2017). The  
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32 investigative report detailed a well-documented history of sexual abuse that had gone on for  
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34 decades. Weinstein and his associates had carefully covered up accusations that were brought  
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36 forward from actresses, assistants, models, and writers and producers, reaching multiple out-of-  
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38 court settlements. According to the report, dozens of Weinstein's employees said they knew of  
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40 his inappropriate behavior but were forced to sign contracts prohibiting the release of any  
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42 information that could damage the mogul's reputation. Less than a week after the release of the  
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44 investigative report, Weinstein was ousted from his company and pushed out from professional  
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46 associations like the Directors Guild of America, the Producers Guild and the Academy of  
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48 Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (Lartey *et al.*, 2017; Robb, 2017). In May 2018, Weinstein was  
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50 charged with rape and sexual assault in cases involving two women (BBC.com, 2018).  
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After Weinstein, the list of prominent and public figures who faced consequences in direct response to being publicly exposed for behavior that they had been privately conducting for years continued to grow at what seemed like an exponential rate. The *New York Times* described a “seismic shift in what behavior is tolerated in the workplace” as it outlined more than 70 men who had been accused of sexual misconduct and had swiftly been publicly and privately sanctioned. Politicians such as Matt Dababneh, the California state assemblyman, Javier Palomarez, Chief of the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, Patrick Meehan, the U.S. representative for Pennsylvania, Trent Franks, the U.S. representative for Arizona; sports figures such as Eric Davis and Donovan McNabb, former N.F.L. players and radio hosts on ESPN, Jerry Richardson, owner of the Carolina Panthers N.F.L. team; actors such as Louis C.K., Andy Dick, Danny Masterson, Kevin Spacey, Jeffrey Tambor, and Ed Westwick were all fired or forced to resign over sexual misconduct allegations (Almukhtar *et al.*, 2017).

In addition to the exposure and sanctioning of public figures, #MeToo can be credited with a shift in organizational policies related to sexual harassment. Late in 2017, global technology giant Microsoft eliminated its policy of forced arbitration agreements for employees who make sexual harassment claims and announced it was supporting legislation introduced by South Carolina senator Lindsey Graham to ban such agreements. Of the decision to stop requiring those who make sexual harassment claims to settle out of court—and off public record—Microsoft’s president and chief legal officer stated “the silencing of people’s voices has clearly had an impact in perpetuating sexual harassment,” (Wingfield and Silver-Greenberg, 2017). Six states including New York have placed limits on nondisclosure agreements (NDAs) so that organizations are no longer able to silence victims of sexual abuse and harassment by requiring them to sign NDAs as part of a settlement agreement (Beitsch, 2018).

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3 Social learning theory states that employees are affected when they personally experience  
4 or observe sanctions for inappropriate behaviors and rewards for positive behaviors (Bandura,  
5 1977), leading them to model behaviors that they perceive as acceptable norms for their work  
6 group or organizations. Hence, organizations' responses to the #MeToo movement through  
7 protections for employees and appropriate sanctions for offenders should signal to other  
8 employees that certain behaviors are unacceptable. Within certain industries, these changes are  
9 already occurring. The hospitality market in Chicago now provides panic buttons for its workers  
10 after the passage of the "Hands Off Pants On" ordinance in July 2018 mandating that  
11 housekeepers have access to portable emergency-contact devices (Elejalde-Ruiz, 2018; Pesce,  
12 2018). Hilton, Hyatt, and Marriott are some of the hotels leading this new development. Changes  
13 are also happening within Wall Street, where guarantees are being included in merger and  
14 acquisition agreements to ensure social due diligence, providing buyers the right to their money  
15 back if revelations of sexual misconduct are discovered post-deal that hurt the business (Ahmed,  
16 2018; Pesce, 2018).

### 17 **Discussion and conclusion**

18 Although the term was coined earlier, the #MeToo movement began after a call on  
19 Twitter by a prominent actress who shared her story of sexual assault. Almost immediately,  
20 Twitter users across the globe began to respond, sharing their own stories and using the hashtag.  
21 This movement brought to the forefront the dehumanizing truth that regardless of decades of  
22 legislation and organizational policies, instances of sexual assault and harassment remained  
23 common, ongoing, and ignored. Through social media, the #MeToo movement rapidly and  
24 publicly shamed many who were accused of sexual harassment and sexual assault. The  
25 conversation around the issue, combined with a slew of news coverage detailing important

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3 consequences faced by powerful figures across industries, served to communicate to global  
4 audiences the changing social norms regarding sexual harassment and assault. Suddenly, those  
5 who had been insulated from consequences for their behavior were publicly sanctioned and  
6 punished, socially and sometimes legally as well. While one can argue that sexual harassment  
7 and assault was never a publicly acceptable norm, organizations' failure to sanction perpetrators  
8 and at times going to great lengths to hide instances of harassment and assault communicated  
9 otherwise. By exposing perpetrators and the companies that shielded them, the women of the  
10 #MeToo movement communicated clearly that norms were changing, and quickly. Thus, rather  
11 than solely exposing harassers and advocating for their punishment after the fact, #MeToo may  
12 help *change* beliefs about the acceptability and understanding of sexual harassment. #MeToo  
13 may also provide incentives for individuals to avoid engaging in harassment (i.e., risks of social  
14 ostracism, job loss) and for organizations to proactively work to deter and sanction harassment,  
15 ultimately reducing its prevalence.  
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33 In conclusion, by taking back power from individual harassers and organizations that  
34 would silence targets, the #MeToo social movement has helped change beliefs and behaviors  
35 regarding sexual harassment and assault in ways that legislation and corporate policies have  
36 previously been unable to. Through millions of tweets, retweets, and other social media postings  
37 of sexual harassment victims sharing their stories, #MeToo provides validation and increases the  
38 belief that these events are pervasive and destructive. By stimulating widespread awareness of  
39 the prevalence of sexual harassment and its negative outcomes and inciting individuals to avoid  
40 perpetrating harassment and organizations to deter and punish it, #MeToo may prove to be a  
41 powerful tool in the war against sexual harassment.  
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