International Journal of Communication 15(2021), 2942–2967 1932–8036/20210005

No Memes No! Digital Persuasion in the #MeToo Era

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This study bridges a gap in communication research by conducting a framing analysis of Twitter memes using the hashtag #MeToo based on the pathos, ethos, and logos persuasion appeals. We examine the use of these appeals in both visual and textual information in the most viral 1,000 #MeToo memes on Twitter during the week in which sexual misconduct allegations were made against Judge Brett Kavanaugh, then-nominee for the U.S. Supreme Court. Findings revealed significantly more pro-MeToo memes than anti-MeToo memes on Twitter. Results also showed that anti-MeToo memes significantly focused more on the emotional appeal and less on the logos and ethos appeals than pro-MeToo memes. Overall, the work contributes to the developing area of digital feminism research and adds to the limited research that explores the different persuasion appeals in the contemporary digital media environment.

Keywords: #MeToo, memes, Twitter, persuasion, content analysis, social media, visual communication, sexual violence, digital technology, gender violence and media

The allegations of sexual harassment and assault against one of the biggest Hollywood names, Harvey Weinstein, in 2017 led to a large-scale female awareness movement entitled *MeToo*. The digital movement started when actress Alyssa Milano used social media to urge those who had experienced any sort of sexual harassment or abuse to tweet about their stories. Victim-survivors across the world used social media to discuss their experiences online (O'Neil, 2018). The #MeToo hashtag went viral and soon the movement gained global support, becoming one of the largest to ever occur on social media in 2017. The online movement spurred subsequent worldwide hashtags in various parts of the world, such as #MeTooIndia, Italy's #QuellaVoltaChe, Spain's #YoTambien, and Arabic-speaking countries' #AnaKaman (Adam & Booth, 2018).

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Date submitted: 2020-06-16

[1] We wish to thank Walid Al-Saqaf from Södertörn University in Stockholm, Sweden, for his contribution in collecting the data for this article.

The MeToo movement is so significant and high profile (see Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019; Mendes, Keller, & Ringrose, 2019) that it "has changed the landscape of digital feminist activism" (Loney-Howes, 2020, p. 144). Participants engaged in this movement for various reasons: to challenge rape myths that deny victim recognition, to structurally analyze sexual violence against women, and ultimately to create a safe space in online communities where victims could share their experiences and care for one another (Mendes, Keller, & Ringrose, 2019). MeToo, thus, became a source of healing and a means of catharsis for victims to the point of seeking some sense of justice and/or social change (Salter, 2019).

Research on the MeToo movement that was launched more than a decade ago has been rapidly growing. For decades, a plethora of feminist scholars has focused on sexual violence and the media from a narrative perspective (Karlsson, 2019), even in recent studies discussing sexual violence in digital spaces (Fileborn, 2017; Mendes, Keller, & Ringrose, 2019). The work here, therefore, contributes to this developing area of communication research and builds on the work of scholars that has explored digital feminist activism and its nature on social media. It also aims to advance visual framing literature in two ways. First, we conduct an integrative framing analysis of Twitter memes. Internet memes are among the top visuals used for communicating on social media, being among the very few online elements characterized by the ability to go viral, reach different cultures, and span the world in a few hours. Despite this, studies covering memes or analyzing their content have been relatively insufficient. Whereas most research on memes has tackled memetic spread and distribution (e.g., Shifman & Thelwall, 2009) or their participation in the digitalization of communication in general (e.g., Wiggins & Bowers, 2015) and culture capital and globalization (e.g., Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2018), empirical research focused on their content on social media is limited (e.g., Liang, Chen, & Dianzi, 2018). Of particular interest is the relatively scarce research that analyzes Twitter memes using an integrative framing approach, in which both the visual and verbal information are analyzed (e.g., Milner, 2013b). A recent criticism of framing scholarship has been the focus exclusively on the analysis of either words or visuals (e.g., Dan, 2017), making it timely to investigate the integration of each modality specifically to understand its role in persuasion.

Second, we bridge a gap in communication research by distinguishing among the different types of persuasion appeals to shed light on their role in framing the MeToo movement online. The significance of memes as persuasive devices, which Aristotle categorized as ethos, pathos, and logos, is well known. Shifman and Thelwall (2009) state that the memes' pervasive nature often serves as a prism for understanding certain aspects of contemporary culture. In addition, Mendes, Keller, and Ringrose (2019) show that Tumblr memes and Twitter hashtags in the MeToo movement managed to create new means through which sexual violence is known and felt.

This study addresses two main questions: First, what kind of persuasion appeals are used in visual and textual information in #MeToo Twitter memes? Second, to what extent are these appeals used in framing the overall online movement? A content analysis was conducted on the most viral 1,000 memes shared in Twitter posts using the #MeToo hashtag. The memes were collected during one week following sexual misconduct allegations made by Christine Ford on July 30, 2018, against Judge Brett Kavanaugh, then nominated to serve as the Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. The time period of our study included the reactions leading up to the U.S. Senate hearings of Kavanaugh and Ford, along with the reactions during and following the hearings. Overall, by analyzing these Internet memes,

our findings revealed clear patterns regarding the different persuasion techniques used to frame the MeToo online social movement.

Social Movements and Digital Media

Social movement as a term was first introduced in research by the German sociologist Lorenz von Stein in the 1950s (Tilly, 2004). It is defined as "a collective challenge (to elites, authorities, other groups or cultural codes) by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interactions with elites, opponents and authorities" (Tarrow, 1994, p. 18) or as Tilly (2004) puts it, "a movement that is comprised of various interest groups that are bound together by one common grievance" (p. 1). Social movements have been around for centuries, but only recently have they been linked to social media platforms and online activism (Deslandes, 2018). Furthermore, online activism has been noted to initiate or help build movements of a more political kind, such as the Green Revolution in Iran, the Egyptian revolution, and the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States (Kavada, 2015).

Scholars have emphasized the empowering potential of social media and their capacity in facilitating mobilizations without the traditional resources and structures offered by conventional organizations (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Fahmy, 2020). In Iran, for example, social media were part of the backbones of the Green Revolution (Ali & Fahmy, 2013). During the movement that occurred in 2009, Iranian activists used social media to protest against the miscount votes for Mir Hossein Mousavi. In the Middle East, youth resorted to social media tools to call for the Arab Spring revolutions, especially in Egypt, where social media were effective tools to encourage and gather protestors (Gerbaudo, 2012). Thus, it is no surprise that research on social media and its possible relation to social movements started to gain momentum in the last decade and most of these studies focused on political events that were initiated or publicized on social media, specifically within a certain country.

The realization that social media have managed to become a significant part of our daily lives encouraged studies exploring the increasing number of people accessing news online. According to a survey by the Pew Research Center (Mitchell, Jurkowitz, Oliphant, & Shearer, 2020), one in five adults in the United States uses social media as their primary source of political news. With the migration to social media for news, political parties started to use social media platforms, especially Twitter, to influence voters. McClelland (2012) shows that politicians deliberately used big data from social networking sites to sway voters, as was the case during the presidential campaign of Donald Trump and his heavy use of Twitter to reach potential voters (Ott, 2017). On the social dimension, almost two thirds of Americans feel that social media help give a voice to underrepresented groups (Anderson, Toor, Rainie, & Smith, 2018). For instance, following the rise of social movements' related hashtags online, such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, seven in 10 American social media users believe those online sites contribute to the effectiveness and reach of such social activism and social movements (Anderson et al., 2018). This role of social media in predicting and motivating activism is fiercely supported (Hsiao, 2018), and several scholars strongly advocate for more empirical investigation to explain the role of social media in political participation and culture (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

Digital Feminism and #MeToo

Scholars have studied the ways social media have been used as a tool by feminist social movements to confront sexism, misogyny, and rape culture. They have shown that sexual assault survivors, specifically using the #MeToo hashtag, shared their experiences and engaged in a "call-out culture" on social media (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018, p. 236). Li and colleagues (2020) examined how social media users described their traumatic sexual assault experiences on Twitter. They found that social media users engaged in hashtag activism, promoting social actions and sharing resources to help sexual assault victims. Other scholars have found that Twitter posts with the hashtag #MeToo showed empathy and encouraged others to continue the movement more than other social media platforms (Manikonda, Beigi, Liu, & Kambhampati, 2018).

Victims all over the world are still engaging with the hashtag to find a supportive community, to seek advice, and to tell their stories (Fileborn, 2017). The #MeToo hashtag was used more than 19 million times on Twitter from the date of actress Alyssa Milano's first tweet on October 15, 2017, through September 30, 2018. September 2018 was the month with the highest number of #MeToo hashtag usage recorded. That month corresponds with the resignation of Leslie Moonves, the chairman and chief executive of CBS, amid allegations of sexual misconduct, and the hearing of Judge Kavanaugh after allegations of sexual misconduct as well (Anderson & Toor, 2018). That month also coincides with the timeframe when the tweets analyzed in our study here were captured.

Most of the reviewed literature refers to #MeToo as a digital and social movement. However, some authors have suggested that disclosing personal experiences online could be described as a form of online activism or even cyber justice, in which victims and survivors can use informal digital spaces to raise awareness around sexual violence and rape culture (Sills et al., 2016). This form of online activism and the emotional need to share experiences online are not exclusive to the MeToo movement. They were evident in other movements of social and political nature, such as the 2011 Egyptian revolution mentioned above, that was primarily initiated by calls on social media. People used virtual platforms to create a community, or as Paolo Gerbaudo (2012) puts it, "Social media have become emotional conduits for reconstructing a sense of togetherness among a spatially dispersed constituency" (p. 159). In a similar way, the MeToo movement created a worldwide community among victims of sexual violence. Victim-survivors' antirape posts and tweets allowed for a less prescriptive narrative of rape to emerge, which gave victims their voices and the chance to be heard, believed, and supported (Loney-Howes, 2020). This "peer-to peer witnessing," as Loney-Howes (2018) calls it, granted a very important element to victims, which is recognition. Loney-Howes explains that online spaces, such as Twitter, where victims could share their stories, fostered a deep sense of solidarity and recognition among participants.

Yet, despite the participants' willingness to challenge sexism and patriarchy digitally, the MeToo movement drew some criticism. That criticism came mostly from men, who perceived the movement as more harmful than beneficial (see Kunst, Bailey, Prendergast, & Gundersen, 2019). This is not surprising considering previous research illustrating how the media provide limited and stereotypical understandings of sexual violence that are mostly informed by rape myths. Such stereotypical content serves the gendered power relations that enable and perpetuate the occurrence of sexual violence in the first place (Hindes &

Fileborn, 2020). The enormous range and scale of experiences reported in the MeToo forum exploded many of these myths.

Memes of Communication

The term *meme* was coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) to describe small units of cultural information that are analogous to genes to explain cultural evolution. The term was derived from the Greek word *mimema*, which means "something that is imitated," (Piata, 2016, p. 2) and it initially referred to any cultural unit that is spread from person to person through replication or imitation: a slogan, a clothing fashion, concepts such as God. According to Dawkins, memes can consist of songs, fads, catchphrases, or images, and are described as minimal cultural information units transferred between individuals, and/or generations, through processes of replication or transmission.

With the advance of communication technology and the rise of social media networks, Internet memes have become one of many new discursive practices that exploit the possibilities of these digital resources. Our analysis of online memes, here, therefore, is worthy of attention because as Milner (2013b) explains, "Internet memes used for political discourse are mediating lenses for observing and understanding the nature of public events" (p. 2358).

Internet memes, as defined by Shifman (2013), are "units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience" (p. 67). Smith (2019) argues that Internet memes "may serve as iconoclastic discursive tools, where the public image of a free-press is lessened by the visual narratives of the meme" (p. 304). These memes, she explains, use multimodal artifacts designed and composed by numerous voices to echo popular and online culture; they are often drawn from pop culture and combined with a simple or captivating phrase. They may include images, text, videos, and audios that are quickly shared through social media; in this sense, they are often referred to as computer-mediated or technology-mediated multimodal artifacts. However, the most common and modern idea of a meme is usually a viral picture with a formatted text message (Gil, 2016).

A frequent characteristic of memes is "satirical humor for public commentary" (Milner, 2013a, p. 2359), so that some consider it to be "a genre of humor and creativity" (Dainas, 2015, p. 59). Internet memes often use exaggeration and incongruous juxtapositions of text and image to invite readers to assume a perspective of superiority to the absurdities of public discourse about serious issues (Shifman, 2012). In her book *Memes in Digital Culture*, Shifman (2014) urges the academic field to further study and analyze Internet memes. Communication researchers, she explains, often feel comfortable overlooking them, considering them absolutely "irrelevant for understanding mass-mediated content," (Shifman, 2014, p. 6) while in fact, they should be seen as socially constructed public discourses. Since then, there has been a growing body of research on digital memes on the Internet, most of which is based on qualitative rather than quantitative analyses.

Liang and colleagues (2018), for example, analyzed Chinese and Taiwanese memes. They found that memes were used as tools to socially or politically influence audiences; China's supporters used memes to discuss nationalism by implicit and satirical content, and Taiwan's supporters engaged in politics through

explicit and critical expression. Nissenbaum and Shifman (2018) used meme templates as a lens to explore cultural globalization, by quantitatively and then qualitatively analyzing some of the most popular meme templates in various languages. They found that although meme templates tended to be dominated by American or Western pop culture, that did not negate the use of local templates. Other important findings include that memes tend to be emotionally disruptive, especially with more negative emotions like anger or irony. Most recently, Mendes, Keller, and Ringrose (2019) qualitatively examined online memes of sexual violence to document unique affective vernacular practices and explore affective aspects of digital connectivity. They argue that social media platforms such as Twitter and Tumblr offer new terrains for digital feminist scholarship. Whereas this growing research provides an understanding of the scope of meme culture, our work seeks to analyze their persuasive roles in the MeToo era.

Digital Persuasion: Ethos, Pathos, and Logos

Aristotle articulated three main types of persuasion: ethos, establishing the credibility of the speaker; pathos, appealing to the emotions of the audience; and logos, establishing a rational basis for an argument. The context for Aristotle's analysis was public speaking about legal and political issues in the Athenian democracy, but his work laid the basis for the study and practice of the art of speaking for centuries, including analyses of contemporary political persuasive techniques (Demirdogen, 2010; Dillards, 2019). For example, a study analyzing the persuasive language used by the winning presidential candidates in the 2002 and 2007 French elections found that Sarkozy emphasized his character and charisma, and Chirac opted for making emotional appeals and stressing values (Mshvenieradze, 2013). More recently, Nave, Shifman, and Tenenboim-Weinblatt (2018) analyzed political posts on Facebook and their persuasive effects. They found that self-presentation is linked to the final success of political posts. Showing emotions, using humor, talking in first person, and self-exposing were among the techniques associated with soliciting higher engagement online.

Although current literature refers to online social networks as the new rhetorical space of the 21st century, linking the ethos, pathos, and logos modes of persuasion and their use on online platforms is scarce. Berlanga, García-García, and Victoria (2013) analyzed verbal conversations on Facebook and found that Facebook users apply all three persuasive strategies while conversing with fellow online users. Ethos was clearly seen in the users' discourse; pathos was also evident in Facebook posts that were based on empathy and affective relationships. However, logos appeared the least of the three techniques in Facebook conversations. It is in this context that we conduct a framing analysis of Twitter memes based on the pathos, ethos, and logos persuasion appeals.

Framing Analysis in the Digital Era

Entman (1993) explains that framing is to "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (p. 52). The framing process is less obtrusive in visual framing than in textual framing because of the realistic nature of visuals and their ability to imitate the appearance of the real world (Messaris & Abraham, 2001).

The interest in studying and analyzing visuals initially started with early advertising research (Fahmy, Bock, & Wanta, 2014). Studies of visual communication effects found that visuals generate much stronger effects on cognition, attitudes, and behavior than words (Fahmy & Alkazemi, 2017). However, there is still a lack of visual communication studies, which mostly stems from "the lack of a clear theoretical model for visual research in the mass communication field and the ambiguity in visuals—factors that slowed the progress of visual studies" (Fahmy et al., 2014, p. 54). Moreover, much of the framing studies focus either exclusively on the analysis of words or visuals (Dan, 2017); studies that try to incorporate a dual modality to analyze both text and images are still rare.

Fahmy and colleagues (2014) explain the largest challenge has been developing a systematic approach that can merge the various elements to expand our knowledge of the visual communication field. Because visuals are usually accompanied by text, several scholars have advocated for an integrative framing analysis approach aiming to analyze verbal frames, visual frames, and the interplay between them (see Dan, 2017; Paivio, 2007). Although this approach might serve as the basis for framing analysis studies that cover both textual and visual aspects, it might be limited for the study of memes in general. Internet memes largely combine visual and verbal elements simultaneously, and initial research suggests that text and image elements of memes are consistent in communicating a specific message (see Milner, 2013b). Yet, inspired by the communication literature, we felt it was necessary to investigate the integration and consistency of textual and visual elements in #MeToo memes. Our work would specifically benefit from this approach because our emphasis is not just on the use of persuasion tools, but also on how these tools are used in framing a trending online social movement with a global framework.

Although scholars have started studying images and their accompanying text (i.e., Ali & Fahmy, 2013; Liang et al., 2018), few researchers have analyzed both the image and the overlaid text of memes. These include memes on the Occupy Wall Street movement (Milner, 2013b), Chinese and Taiwanese memes (Liang et al., 2018), and online memes of sexual violence (Mendes, Keller, & Ringrose, 2019). The current study aims to conduct an integrative quantitative analysis of image–text memes on Twitter. Based on preliminary research suggesting that text and image elements of memes are rather consistent in delivering the same messages (Milner, 2013b), our study began with the following hypothesis:

H1: The image and the overlaid text in #MeToo Twitter memes are likely to be consistent and complementary to each other.

We then proposed an exploratory research question that examines the context of the movement, as portrayed by memes.

RQ1: How did the memes frame the MeToo movement on Twitter in terms of overall tone (pro-/antimovement)?

Previous research has suggested that memes have the capacity to influence people's political perspectives or opinions as a persuasion tool (Kadir & Lokman, 2014). Building on the current literature, this study examines whether persuasion is evident in memes in social cases as much as political ones. Nissenbaum and Shifman (2018) suggest that memes are emotionally disruptive. The authors conclude that memes tend

to communicate negative emotions such as anger or irony. Recent work has also suggested that social media posts are more successful when playing on emotions including humor and anger-evoking cues (Nave et al., 2018). Because memes have been both criticized and supported online (Kunst et al., 2019), we further explore the context of the overall tone of #MeToo Twitter memes by examining the use of the three modes of persuasion in framing the movement.

RQ2: To what extent were the three modes of persuasion (pathos, logos, and ethos) used in framing the overall tone of #MeToo memes on Twitter?

Method

Data Collection

To investigate how viral Twitter memes are constructed and what persuasive techniques are used, we engaged in a systematic analysis of tweets. The tweets were collected in the run-up to, during, and just after the U.S. Senate hearings of Judge Brett Kavanaugh. The collection process began a few days before the sexual assault hearing against Kavanaugh (on September 27) and continued two days after the hearing to capture the reactions that immediately followed. We collected all of the tweets using the hashtag #MeToo spanning one week, September 22, 2018–September 29, 2018.

For the first step, we employed a Twitter analysis tool, Mecodify, which allowed us to use a Web search mechanism to retrospectively capture 185,370 tweets (742,614 including retweets). These tweets included text, still pictures, links, videos, audio files, memes, and cartoons with the #MeToo hashtag. Thereafter, we used Mecodify to filter out any tweet that did not contain a picture. This was important because our focus here was on image memes.[2] As a result, 23,707 image tweets were retained after removing retweets and/or identical tweets to avoid repetition, which were then sorted by the number of retweets (from most to less retweeted). The data were then downloaded locally as comma-separated value text files for further processing and analysis.[3]

Once all of the image tweets were identified, we manually selected each tweet that satisfied the following conditions: (1) It presented a piece of culture or a joke that sends a clear message largely through a picture that is accompanied by overlaid text. Because previous literature suggests that memes are often characterized by humor along with satirical effects, we excluded infographics and other strictly informational image tweets. (2) The tweet was made exclusively over the Internet. We, therefore, excluded memes that

[2] An image meme is a captioned image that has a picture and overlaid text (see Gil, 2016).

[3] According to Mecodify's documentation (Al-Saqaf, 2016), the Web search of the tool behaves exactly like the Web search function on twitter.com. One limitation of Twitter's Web search is the inability to fetch all information (e.g., time and account) of the retweets. To obtain this information, one would have needed to purchase a premium Twitter API package. However, this was not necessary in our case given that we were concerned with only the original tweets, which were captured fully using Mecodify's Web search functionality. After doing several tests comparing Web search results on Twitter with those of Mecodify, we found a perfect match, which demonstrated that the tool is highly reliable in capturing tweets as required.

had been previously published offline in any other format, such as books, newspapers, or magazines. We specifically included memes produced by regular Internet creators and excluded those made by professionals, including cartoons, company logos, and professional marketing materials. To be consistent with procedures followed in previous research and to maximize external validity and ensure a good representation of our viral memes' population, we identified the top 1,000 most retweeted memes to include in our sample (see Clark & Ferguson, 2011; Kim, Jang, Kim, & Wan, 2018). This entire manual selection process was labor-intensive and required three weeks for completion.

Coding Memes

We coded 1,000 memes with the hashtag #MeToo, with the unit of analysis a single meme. A detailed set of categories was developed, and the main coder was instructed to code each meme according to the following variables.

Visual/Textual Dominance

Each meme was coded as picture-dominant, text-dominant, or equally dominant. To be coded as visually dominant, a meme's message needed to be communicated primarily through the visual. To be coded as text-dominant, the meme needed to be heavily dependent on text (see Figure 1). Memes that depended on both the picture and the overlaid text equally were coded as equally dominant.

Figure 1. An example of collected #MeToo memes from Twitter that is text-dominant.

Visual/Textual Consistency

This variable was coded based on whether the overlaid text matched the picture in the meme. Each meme was coded as complementary or contrasting. Figure 2 shows an example of contrasting visual and textual information. Memes that did not fit into these two categories were coded as not applicable.

Figure 2. A collected #MeToo meme from Twitter that uses contrasting visuals and textual information.

Pro-/Antimovement

The combination of both textual and visual information in each meme was measured in terms of pro-MeToo, anti-MeToo, or neutral/not applicable. We coded whether the meme used positive or encouraging combination of words and visuals, as opposed to using negative or threatening ones.

Ethos

Each meme was coded based on the following categories: celebrity/authority/credible figures, such as researchers or celebrity activists; testimonials (person in the street excluding celebrity); other; and not applicable (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. A collected #MeToo meme from Twitter that pictures Nobel Peace Laureate Malala Yousafzai.

Pathos

Each meme was coded based on the following categories: humor and sarcasm, inspiration and hope, sadness, sympathy and pity, disgust, courage and strength, hatred, love, other, and not applicable (see Figure 4).

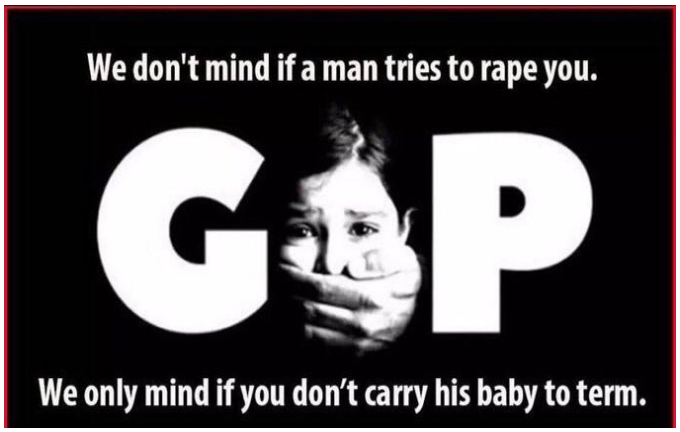

Figure 4. An example of collected #MeToo memes from Twitter that uses the pathos appeal.

Logos

Each meme was coded based on the following categories: statistics, recorded evidence, historical data or facts, studies, surveys or academic papers, other, and not applicable (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. An example of collected #MeToo memes from Twitter that uses logos.

Persuasion Technique

For this variable, we coded each meme based on its dominant mode of persuasion: ethos, logos, and pathos, if applicable. We followed a two-step approach. The first step identified the dominant element in a meme. In other words, the process compared the text of the meme with its visual element to identify which mode had more weight. For example, in the case of a graphic image showing the percentage of sexual harassment against women with overlaying text, the visual element held more weight than the textual element. For the second step, we then coded each meme for the persuasion technique most evident in its stronger element as the dominant persuasion technique (in this case, the visual).

One of the authors completed the coding of 1,000 memes included in the data set.4 As a check of reliability, a second person coded 10% (100 memes) of the memes. For all variables, the rate of agreement by chance was higher than 0.74 using Scott's pi (see Scott, 1955). The reliability checks for all variables yielded acceptable agreement levels according to Neuendorf (2003). Specifically, for visual/textual dominance, the rate of agreement was 0.76. For visual/textual consistency, agreement was 0.77. For pro-/antimovement, agreement was 0.81. For ethos, agreement was 0.78. For pathos, agreement was 0.75. For logos, agreement was 0.93. For persuasion technique, agreement was 0.87.

[4] Each meme was first coded according to the three appeal variables: logos, ethos, and pathos. Each meme could be coded for more than one element (e.g., one meme could be coded for having a celebrity activist in the ethos appeal and also coded for conveying both hatred and disgust in the pathos appeal). Next, memes coded for more than one appeal were coded for the dominant persuasion appeal to capture the strongest technique used.

Results

Communication on Twitter was at the center of the MeToo movement before and during the Kavanaugh hearing, and we found that the majority of the top memes in our one-week sample (85.8%) were in the days leading up to the sexual assault hearing. The frequency of the memes was relatively small the day of the hearing and the two days that followed. During the timeframe of the study, a number of memes were extensively retweeted and liked. The most retweeted meme was tweeted 2,480 times and favorited 3,163 times.

Because a meme usually contains both visual and textual elements, it made sense that meme creators would make use of both elements. There was equal dominance for both picture and overlaid text in 46.1% of the memes in our sample. In 37.5% of the memes, the image was the more dominant element, and only a relatively small percentage of the memes (16.4%) had the overlaid text as dominant. The overwhelming majority of the memes (97%) had the overlaid text complementing the picture (see Table 1).

Table 1. Frequencies and Percentages of Visual/Textual Dominance and Visual/Textual Consistency in #MeToo Twitter Memes (N = 1,000).

Variable	*n*	%
Visual/textual dominance		
Equal dominance	461	46.1
Picture is more dominant	375	37.5
Text is more dominant	164	16.4
Total	1,000	100.0
Visual/textual consistency		
Text is complementary	970	97.0
Text is contrasting	19	1.9
Not applicable	11	1.1
Total	1,000	100.0

To test whether the image and the overlaid text in #MeToo Twitter memes would be significantly consistent and complementary to each other (H1), we recoded the visual/verbal consistency variable into two dichotomous variables (complementary and contrasting). Results of a *t* test yielded significant differences between complementary (M = 0.97, SD = 0.17) and contrasting (M = 0.02, SD = 0.14), $t(999) = 103.34$, $p < .001$. In other words, results showed that the visual and textual elements in the #MeToo memes were consistent in communicating messages, in line with preliminary research (Milner, 2013b). However, the underlying role that emerged in these few contrasting memes with contradicting textual and visual information revealed a noteworthy reinforcement process. Because of the humorous and sarcastic nature of memes in general, a closer examination suggests that their contrasting visual/verbal elements served to emphasize and exaggerate the content of the meme's message (i.e., see Figure 2).

Overall, the content of the Twitter memes was important in framing the online movement. Previous research has found that memes are often used as tools to influence audiences (Liang et al., 2018). The

majority of the #MeToo memes in our sample (60.9%) were promovement; one fifth of the memes (20%) were antimovement and the remaining ones were coded as neutral and not applicable (19.1%). To further explore the first research question examining the overall tone of #MeToo memes, we recoded the pro-/antimovement variable into two separate dichotomous variables (pro-MeToo and anti-MeToo). Results of a *t* test yielded significant differences between pro-MeToo (M = 0.61, SD = 0.49) and anti-MeToo (M = 0.20, SD = 0.40), $t(999) = 16.14$, $p < .001$ (see Table 2). Our finding therefore suggests significantly more pro-MeToo memes than anti-MeToo memes on Twitter. This result speaks to the majority of the memes' emphasis on supporting the movement rather than sharing memes opposing the movement.

Table 2. Frequencies and Percentages of the Most Dominant Persuasion Technique and the Overall Tone of #MeToo Twitter Memes (N = 808).

Overall tone	Pathos	Logos	Ethos	Total
Pro-MeToo, *n* (%)	302 (49.7)	270 (44.4)	36 (5.9)	608 (100)
Anti-MeToo, *n* (%)	157 (78.5)	38 (19.0)	5 (2.5)	200 (100)

Note. For this analysis, the neutral/not applicable category was coded as missing. $X^2 = 50.98$, $p < .001$.

Research Question 2 examined the extent to which the three modes of persuasion (pathos, logos, and ethos) were used in framing #MeToo Twitter memes. To start, our analysis revealed that more than eight in 10 memes used the pathos technique (85.2%), making pathos the most identified persuasion appeal in our sample. Almost half of the memes analyzed (45.3%) used the humor and sarcasm appeal. Other emotions included inspiration and hope (6.7%), sympathy and pity (4.3%), sadness (4.7%), disgust (4%), and courage and strength (3.1%). Regarding ethos, 74.4%of the memes in our sample used this appeal. More than six in 10 memes (62.0%) used celebrity activists or authoritative figures to establish credibility. Finally, the logos technique was the least identified in our sample, with 47.0% of the memes using this technique. Almost four of 10 of the memes relied on recorded evidence (39.8%).

Of particular interest was the use of the dominant mode of persuasion that framed the MeToo movement in Twitter memes. As shown in Table 3, the analysis suggests a clear pattern regarding the use of the pathos, logos, and ethos techniques between pro-MeToo and anti-MeToo memes analyzed.

Table 3. Frequencies and Percentages of the Three Modes of Persuasion (Pathos, Logos, and Ethos) Used in #MeToo Twitter Memes (N = 1 000).

Persuasion appeal	*n*	%
Pathos		
Humor & sarcasm	453	45.3
Inspiration & hope	67	6.7
Sadness	47	4.7
Sympathy & pity	43	4.3
Disgust	40	4.0
Courage & strength	31	3.1
Hatred	17	1.7
Love	10	1.0
Other	44	4.4
Total	852	85.2
Not applicable	248	24.8
Ethos		
Celebrity/authority/credible figures	620	62.0
Testimonials	24	2.4
Total	744	74.4
Not applicable	356	35.6
Logos		
Recorded evidence	398	39.8
Facts/historical data	20	2.0
Statistics/studies	8	0.8
Other	44	4.4
Total	470	47.0
Not applicable	530	53.0

Although the emotional appeal was prominently used by the majority of the memes, for the most part, antimovement memes significantly emphasized the emotional appeal (78.5%) more than promovement memes (49.7%). Furthermore, our analysis showed that antimovement memes focused significantly less on the logos appeal (19.0%) than promovement memes (44.4%). See Figure 6 for an example of a promovement meme using the logos technique.

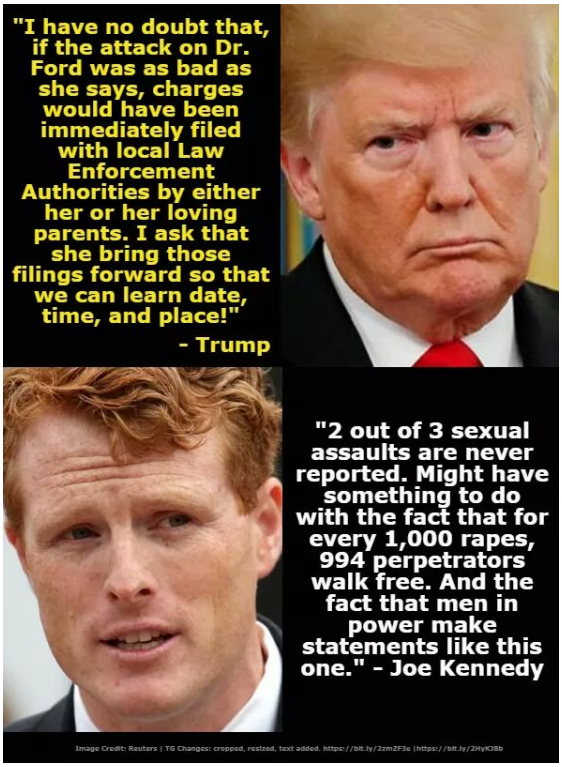

Figure 6. An example of collected #MeToo memes from Twitter that uses logos as a persuasive appeal.

The persuasion technique variable measured here was based on the meme's dominant mode of persuasion. Although the ethos technique was prominently used in #MeToo Twitter memes overall, this technique dominated only 8.4% of the memes in our sample. Furthermore, our analysis suggests that the ethical appeal was used less prominently in antimovement memes (2.5%) than promovement memes (5.9%). Together, these results suggest that anti-MeToo memes focused most on the emotional appeal (see Figure 7) and less on the logos and ethos appeals than pro-MeToo memes.

Figure 7. An example of collected #MeToo memes from Twitter uses pathos as a persuasive technique.

Discussion

The use of Twitter and other social media to discuss issues around abuse, harassment, and assault (sexual and otherwise) and about the structural issues contributing to and maintaining these started before 2017. But the wave of posts under the hashtag #MeToo that debuted in October 2017 has provoked a discussion about the way digital platforms support (or not) women's voices against dominant, networked misogyny (see Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2019). #MeToo thus represented an important shift as a social media phenomenon that empowered women to express their frustrations with the status quo. Prior to elaborating on the content and the various persuasive appeals used, we discuss the relationship between visual and textual information in framing the movement.

Milner (2016) discusses the multimodality and the recontextualization process that occurs in Internet memes. Memes, he explains, are the results of a reappropriation process in which small digital annotations transform the relationship between an image and its context. Most of the visual and textual elements in the #MeToo memes in our sample were significantly consistent, but in those that showed a contrast, it is worth noting the underlying role that emerged. Figure 2 depicts a meme with a pathos appeal, one that plays on the humorous side by presenting contrasting textual and visual elements; such a technique often serves to emphasize and exaggerate the meme's message. Finally, there was equal dominance for both picture and overlaid text in almost half of the memes analyzed.

Looking at #MeToo memes holistically (both visual and textual), our study reveals significantly more pro-MeToo memes than anti-MeToo memes. In the context of the sexual misconduct allegations made against Judge Brett Kavanaugh, the #MeToo memes collectively allowed women and men to share ideas and experiences and to make their voices heard. As Baer (2016) says, "Digital platforms offer great potential for broadly disseminating feminist ideas, shaping new modes of discourse about gender and sexism, connecting to different constituencies, and allowing creative modes of protest to emerge" (p. 18). The goal of the MeToo movement was awareness as a first step toward social change. Twitter offered a space for women, a platform where they can communicate, offer support, and collectively challenge and call out

misogynic practices and injustices. And our findings here demonstrate that, by and large, the top #MeToo memes promoted and supported the movement.

Moreover, individuals not likely to be engaged in politics may have developed through #MeToo memes a vested interest in the process (see Heiskanen, 2017). Memes have the capacity to influence people's political perspectives as a persuasion tool (Kadir & Lokman, 2014), especially social media posts focusing on emotions (Nave et al., 2018). Therefore, it is not surprising that more than eight in 10 memes in our study used the pathos appeal. Digitized narratives of sexual violence on Twitter forge new mediated connections and create "new affective platform vernaculars" (Mendes, Keller, & Ringrose, 2019, p. 1293). A wide array of feelings was represented, ranging from sympathy (directed at or against Kavanaugh) to humor (see Figure 8). Users sometimes personalized the issue by drawing from their own experiences or emotions, playing on emotions like anger or sympathy.

Figure 8. Examples of the most retweeted anti-MeToo Twitter memes using the pathos appeal.

The Kavanaugh hearing represented a unique moment in the MeToo movement in which people tried to leverage its power to serve a specific political agenda. #MeToo memes often reinforced already polarized views. Opponents of Kavanaugh for his prolife stance could have been motivated to seize any opportunity to disqualify him, just as Kavanaugh supporters could have been politically motivated to discredit the MeToo movement. This political climate provides a plausible explanation for the large percentage of pathos in both pro- and anti-MeToo memes.

Although analyzing the political climate to explain the various modes of persuasion used in memes was not the primary goal in this research, the ongoing political debate at the time provides a reasonable explanation for the large percentage of persuasion appeals noted in our sample. The debut of the MeToo movement on social media had a strong ethical component because it is the classic "he said, she said" scenario, in which the credibility of the accuser and accused is paramount. Multiple accusations against particular celebrities gave substance to individual claims, while simultaneously pointing to an underlying culture of harassment in which men felt they had permission to use their power and influence against victims, a long-standing complaint in feminist literature (i.e., see Baer, 2016). Social media activity expanded from ethical appeals (ethos) to accumulating statistical evidence of such systematic behavior (logos) and inevitably stirred up powerful emotional responses on both sides of the debate (pathos). We, therefore, can infer that the highly charged political context of the Kavanaugh hearings provided a key opportunity for the deployment of all of these persuasive techniques.

But there were significant differences between the pro- and anti-MeToo appeals.[5] Our analysis here showed that ethical appeals were detected in approximately 75% of the memes analyzed, but when the memes were coded exclusively for dominant appeal, ethos played a much-diminished role, with anti-MeToo memes using the ethos technique significantly less than pro-MeToo memes. Logos played a less significant role on both sides, but once again there was a statistically significant difference in the presence of logos when the memes were coded for dominant appeal: 19% of the memes opposing the movement compared with 44.4% of those supporting it. The emotional appeal was prominently used by the majority of all memes and also represented the greatest percentage when coded for dominance. In antimovement memes, the emotional appeal was dominant in 78.5%, whereas pathos dominated in only 49.7% of promovement memes, another statistically significant difference. It seems plausible that the anti-MeToo memes used the pathos emotional appeal to turn the tables on female accusers by portraying men as the real victims (see Figure 8), as opposed to pro-MeToo memes (see Figure 9), which mostly used logos and ethos appeals.

[5] A memorable instance of the difference between the discourses offline is the juxtaposition of Ford's calm account of her own harrowing experience and the emotional denunciations made by Kavanaugh in his own defense.

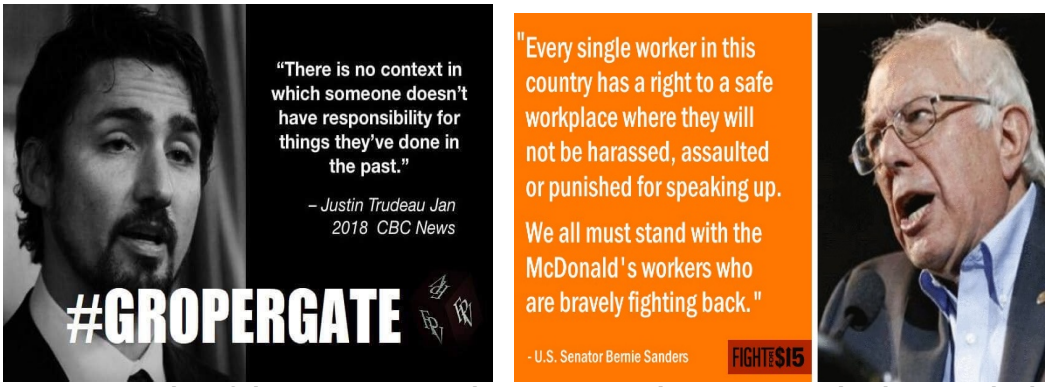

Figure 9. Examples of the most retweeted pro-MeToo Twitter memes using logos and ethos appeals.

The main contribution of our study does not lie so much in identifying the persuasion appeals used, but in revealing a deeper issue pointing to differences in the techniques that framed the tone of the MeToo movement on Twitter. A large portion of our study focused on unpacking the various modes of persuasion used in the #MeToo meme culture. Guided by previous literature, we argue that the dominant mode of persuasion used allowed for additional insights into how the MeToo movement was framed in viral memes and, in doing so, become tools to promote awareness about this movement.

Our findings lead us to be cautiously optimistic. One fifth of the memes analyzed were antimovement. Current literature suggests that by the time of Kavanaugh's accusation, there was public and political backlash against Ford, illustrating the depth and significance of hostility toward survivors who dare to speak out against powerful men (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019). However, there were significantly more pro-MeToo memes than anti-MeToo memes. MeToo memes analyzed were overwhelmingly promovement, a finding that is supported by research indicating that Twitter is commonly used to communicate feminist views (Mendes et al., 2018). These memes generally provide persuasive vehicles to support the movement in ways that we hope can be used to better understand and challenge rape myths. They hold the potential to contribute toward raising awareness about sexual violence against women and bringing about real-world changes.

In sum, findings of this study contribute to the developing area of digital feminism research. Although some scholars are increasingly attending to victim-survivors' online storytelling, few communication scholars have examined the particular persuasive devices used in digital activism and its nature on social media. Our work, therefore, bridges a gap in communication research by conducting a quantitative analysis of #MeToo Twitter memes based on the pathos, ethos, and logos persuasion appeals. Nevertheless, our study is not without limitations.

Our findings emerge as the very tip of a persuasive "iceberg," aiming at understanding the existing diverse persuasive techniques used to frame specific online messages in the context of an online global social phenomenon. Online content is a dynamic environment, and future research should keep analyzing the use of different persuasive appeals. Future work is needed to focus on how such appeals evolve over

time, by which types of individuals, with what agenda and what impact. For example, it would be interesting to examine how victim-survivors of sexual abuse use these memes. The reader should also bear in mind that a comprehensive analysis of external factors influencing the creation and dissemination of Twitter memes is beyond the scope of this study.

Finally, the work here is based on the analyses of top MeToo memes, and the metric for these memes is based on the most retweeted content. It is worth noting that retweets do not necessarily mean an endorsement of content or a reflection of the Twitterati's own ideas about the quality of the memes or their arguments. Such shortcomings may be addressed through qualitative studies using interviews and participatory observations, which could reveal more insights about the patterns observed here.

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