

# How #MeToo really was different, according to data

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By Abby Ohlheiser

MeToo is an old idea: that survivors, sharing their stories of sexual harassment and abuse, can change society for the better. But last fall, in the wake of sexual misconduct allegations against producer Harvey Weinstein and others in Hollywood, media and other industries, this idea went viral in a way that, instinctively, felt different. A new Twitter analysis from social media analytics firm [Crimson Hexagon](#) and the [PEORIA Project](#) of George Washington University's [Graduate School of Political Management](#), shared with The Washington Post in advance of publication, indicates just how right that instinct was.

There are a couple different ways to measure virality on a platform such as Twitter. The first is volume — how many posts were made about it. The second is reach — how many people saw those posts. When you compare the #MeToo “moment” to other sexual harassment conversations on Twitter since 2010, #MeToo stands out as uniquely viral by both measures.

“Twitter users move from topic to topic relatively rapidly,” said Michael Cohen, a professor at George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management and chief data scientist of the PEORIA Project. “Sustained interest at this level looks more like #BLM,” or Black Lives Matter, he said, as opposed to any other viral hashtag of the day that spikes once and then fizzles out into obscurity. In other words, in a year crowded with news, #MeToo really has cemented itself as a movement on social media.

The data also provides quantifiable support for one of the more popular theories behind #MeToo's explosive growth, that “it wasn't until powerful and influential celebrities like Alyssa Milano and Ashley Judd shared their own stories on social media that the movement truly took hold,” said Stephanie Newby, Crimson Hexagon's chief executive. Other Weinstein accusers included Gwyneth Paltrow and Heather Graham.

Me too.

Suggested by a friend: "If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me too.' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem."



**Alyssa Milano**

@Alyssa\_Milano

If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet.

3:21 PM - Oct 15, 2017

52.5K 90.4K people are talking about this

As my colleague Paul Farhi [wrote in late December](#):

The celebrity aspect of the story made Weinstein different from almost every alleged perpetrator before him: Many of the accusers were better known than the accused.

Although some of the women who brought allegations against other men became well known — such as Thomas accuser Anita Hill and Clinton accuser Paula Jones — their fame was based almost entirely on their accusations.

While famous people propelled #MeToo — which was sparked by a tweet by Milano — The Post and other publications noted that Tarana Burke founded the “me too” movement a decade ago to help survivors, particularly young women in marginalized communities.

Here's a good visualization of how the #MeToo moment compares with previous conversations about sexual harassment. In the chart below, which covers the years 2013 through the end of 2017, there are two big “peaks” that are hard to miss. The first, smaller one is from early October 2016, when [The Post obtained a video](#) in which then-candidate Donald Trump was recorded making lewd remarks about women in 2005. That bigger spike shows the sexual harassment conversation on Twitter in the month that #MeToo went viral.

The research team collected more than 96 million tweets from 2010 through the end of 2017 that had something to do with the sexual harassment “conversation.” They identified those tweets by searching for keywords and hashtags that were wholly or partially about sexual harassment and abuse. The “volume” here refers to the total number of tweets in any given month that fit within the “conversation”; the mean tweet reach looks at how many people that tweet probably reached, from a sample of 300,000 tweets for that month, taking into account the average follower count of the authors.

#MeToo has been, in turns, empowering and exhausting for survivors of sexual assault and abuse. When [I reported on its virality last fall](#), I spoke to one woman for whom sharing her #MeToo story was an epiphany. Another was exhausted by the repetition and pointed out the emotional toll survivor-based hashtags can have on sexual assault victims. Other hashtags, such as #YesAllWomen, #WhatWereYouWearing, #YouOkSis, #SurvivorPrivilege and #WhyWomenDontReport, had encouraged survivors to share their stories before.

A few months isn't long enough to know whether the unique reach of #MeToo will change things in a meaningful way, long-term. But I was curious how it compared with some of these other viral survivor hashtags. When Crimson Hexagon compared the volume of tweets for each hashtag, the results were expected and clear: #MeToo rose above the rest:

In some ways #MeToo is more comparable to long-lasting political or advocacy hashtags, such as #MAGA or #BLM, than it is to other survivor conversations on Twitter.

But #MeToo is distinctive from other social media movement by the role celebrities played, not just in its existence but in how it happened — as victims first, and then as amplifying advocates.

Said Michael Cornfield, an associate professor of political management at George Washington University and the research director for the PEORIA Project, “Celebrities get involved in issue advocacy all the time, but not in such visible profusion. That means that the #metoo explosion is not only going to be hard to forget, but hard to replicate.”

### More reading:

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