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#Metoo: Not My Movement

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Abstract

September 2017 marked the rebirth of the #Metoo movement where women who have experienced sexual harassment and/or assault were asked to unite and become visible through the use of "#Metoo." #Metoo exists at the intersection of gender exploitation and toxic sexuality in an effort to spotlight the prevalence of sex based violence. #Metoo: Not my movement explores the multiple facets and identities this viral hashtag has excluded: the LGBTQ community, women of color, as well as the male population. Unfortunately the viral reboot of #metoo erased from its memory the creator, a woman of color trying to create a safe space full of resources for those who have faced traumatic events resulting from rape culture. To further unpack the implications of this reboot, I utilize the theoretical framework of gendered rhetoric and linguistic vulnerability. As such, I present four tenets for critical analysis including: inclusion, reconceptualization, gender diversity, and oppression/liberation. Each framework is used to examine the vulnerabilities and exclusions within the social media campaign. My critique positions the #metoo campaign experience as a privilege for those who can speak out and those who can afford to 'out' themselves as survivors. Additionally I suggest a dangerous implication surrounding #metoo results from the campaign diminishing survivors to a single hashtag and invalidating the complexity of traumatic experiences. This movement fails to recognize the human being behind the hashtag, the body behind the social media account, and the experience that is their own unique story. Instead of creating social change to dismantle rape culture and violence, this campaign exploits vulnerability. Save the body, not the hashtag.

#Metoo: Not my movement

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Rhetorical Theories - 001

Amy Arellano

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Part I

#Metoo through Gendered Rhetoric:

Gendered rhetoric is classified through the three waves of feminism whilst utilizing four primary frameworks: inclusion, reconceptualization, gender diversity, and oppression/liberation (Borchers, 2006). Through these four primary frameworks, I was able to dissect and analyze the #metoo social media campaign. With further analysis into this theory, each framework was used to identify the vulnerabilities within the campaign. Below are the major concepts, utilizations, and structures for each primary framework.

Inclusion:

_____The primary role of inclusion seeks to identify and uncover the “excluded” from the rhetorical artifact (Borchers, 2006). Through inclusion we are able to uncover the “forgotten” or “misunderstood” through which the campaign exists. Because the #metoo campaign was widespread and trending, I chose to analyze who and why these individuals were silenced or forgotten, and the effect on the movement as a whole.

Reconceptualization:

It is argued that women use rhetoric differently, and in turn, create a different rhetorical purpose through their conceptualization of rhetoric (Borchers, 2006). The thought stands that a “feminist perspective will empower women” (Borchers, 2006, p. 204), but yet the #metoo campaign challenges that idea of women empowerment. Although a movement created to empower, became a movement establishing vulnerability. Through the concept of reconceptualization, rhetors reevaluate and analyze what is or isn’t seen beyond the surface of the artifact.

Gender Diversity:

This primary framework has to do with the “distinction between men and women”, specifically when looking at rhetoric (Borchers, 2006, p. 204). This framework attempts to reconstruct the concept between gendered rhetoric, and even redefine the “distinction” between men and women. This framework within gendered rhetoric attempts to reconstruct an understanding of gender diversity through the means of gender, sex, and sexuality.

Oppression and Liberation:

Throughout rhetorical criticism, we see rhetoric that oppresses women as well as rhetoric that liberates women. How rhetoric “frees womens voices” (Borchers, 2006, p. 204), and creates a hypothetical ‘breakable barrier’ between oppression and liberation. Unfortunately, this campaign was aimed towards liberating women through a social platform, but instead, created a label of vulnerability and oppression. This hashtag created an outlet for women, and only women. Women of privilege, and women who had the voice and the space to speak out as a survivor..

Through Gendered Rhetoric comes Invitational Rhetoric:

Invitational rhetoric is defined: “Understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self determination” (Foss & Griffin. 1995 p.5). Invitational rhetoric has two primary roles: “offering perspectives and creating external conditions to offer equality and respect” (Foss & Griffin, 1995, p.7) While analyzing the #metoo campaign, although meant to be invitational and equal in creation, was in actuality limiting and vulnerable in nature. Intersectionality, equality, and establishment was lost and the social platform that was created wasn’t necessarily invitational anymore.

Gaining a new perspective:

Through gendered rhetoric, the four primary frameworks, as well as invitational rhetoric, we are able to see the world in a lense created to uncover something beyond the surface. Through this theory, rhetors seek to understand the bounds of gender in society and their effect on rhetoric. The way gender as well as sex can bind us to rhetoric, even if it isn't meant to. Each individual has a specific way of experiencing reality and creating their own identities. Through invitational and gendered rhetoric, we can uncover new perspectives within ourselves as well as within society.

Part II

#Metoo Campaign:

_____The #metoo campaign was originally established by an african american woman in 2006, in response to a 13 year old girl facing her experience of sexual violence. Tarana Burke took this life altering experience and created a nonprofit called "Just be Inc." This nonprofit was created to help victims of sexual violence and assault through resources, advocacy, and awareness. She gave this movement a name: me too. Almost ten years later, the hashtag #metoo came to light through Hollywood after countless allegations against Harvey Weinstein came pouring in.

Alyssa Milano created the tweet advocating for women to retweet 'metoo' if they had been a victim of sexual assault. Unfortunately, Hollywood stars began to take credit for something that was created and established years ago. This movement was created to be a social platform for women to help uncover the prevalence of this issue, but instead had the capacity of creating a harmful, and vulnerable label for survivors.

The #metoo campaign exploded on social media through hollywood, celebrity influence, as well as social media apps and platforms. The original author was not credited, and the reason

for the movement wasn't explained or clarified. Through this hashtag campaign the original message was silenced and the message instead became a "trend" rather than a social movement. Burke told the news time and time again it's not about a viral campaign, it's about a movement. Tarana intended for this movement to reach young women of color facing these battles and who had survived these monstrous acts. Burke mentioned that the challenge is now taking it beyond a viral moment (Criss & Santiago, 2017).

Throughout this viral campaign there has been conflicts with intersectionality, the queer community, and men who have faced these issues. Women of color spoke out explaining that white women are picking and choosing when and how they would like to stand up for one another, while black women do not get the same magnitude of support for issues such as these (Bennett, 2017). April Reign, a digital media strategist states "Women of color are demanded to be silent and are erased" (Bennett, 2017). Once again, a movement created in equality, became a viral hashtag silencing those around us.

Part III

Linguistic Vulnerability:

Judith Butler investigates that individuals are linguistic beings, "that we are formed in language and that formative power precedes and conditions any decision we might make about it" (Butler, 1997, p.2). I believe this means that language can cause a barrier over us, it can make or break our self concept, and has the potential to create harmful labels among us. Butler also states "We claim that language acts, and acts against us, and the claim we make is a further instance of language, one which seeks to arrest the force of the prior instance. We exercise the force of language even as we seek to counter its force, caught up in the bind that no act of censorship can undo" (Butler, 1997, p.1).

The #metoo campaign was used and misused to represent the prevalence of sexual assault and violence around women. The hashtag 'me too' doesn't take back the "prior experience (i.e. sexual assault, violence, and harassment)" as Butler mentions. This viral hashtag doesn't report the perpetrator, doesn't find justice in the monstrosity of the violence, and doesn't save the life behind the words 'me too'. We are using this phrase to raise awareness, but what about the life behind the hashtag and the experience that shaped this human being. "No act of censorship can undo" (Butler, 1997, p.1). Language can't undo the assault that took place. Language can't undo the violence that survivors carry day to day. Language can't justify the prevalence of the problem or create a social movement.

Masked Violence, Muted Voices:

In the book, "*The Sexual Politics of Meat*" Carol Adams speaks about the silenced voices behind the violence within society. "Behind every meal is an absence, the death of an animal whose place the meat takes. With the word "meat" the truth about death is absent. This is not unlike feminists who find that issues of language imbricate women's oppression" (Adams, 1990, p.63).

Behind every #metoo, there is a life, a story, and an experience. We are boiling down a human experience, and possibly life altering story, down to a viral hashtag containing two words. Through this we are muting the survivor, and we are masking the violence that has taken place. As mentioned earlier, this movement was taken and altered in many forms. What was created to be an outlet and resource for women of color and sexual assault survivors, became a white feminist movement within Hollywood and social media. This campaign ended up muting and oppressing more voices than liberating them. It was an outlet for the privileged. It was an outlet

forcing survivors to ‘out’ themselves. It was an outlet creating a vulnerable label for these women.

Implications and Analysis:

After looking at the four primary frameworks, gendered rhetoric, and invitational rhetoric, what is this viral hashtag communicating to survivors? In more ways than one, it is putting a harmful and vulnerable label on those survivors who have decided to out themselves. And what about the women, men, and queer communities who choose not to come forward? Which ends up muting their voices, and masking the violence they endured. Many people in society claimed this is #notmymovement. The #metoo campaign was a privilege to those who could speak out, who had support to speak out, and who wanted to ‘out’ themselves as survivors. Not everyone has the ability to do those things. Instead of creating prevalence and moving towards social change, this campaign was rooted in vulnerability and created a harmful label. As Tarana Burke mentioned earlier, we must move this viral hashtag into a social movement.

Diving into the four primary frameworks of gendered rhetoric, the #metoo campaign fails to utilize every framework.

- 1) Inclusion: The #metoo campaign was altered to be a white, privileged feminist movement which ended up excluding women of color, men, the queer community, and basically everyone who wasn’t a white female with the privilege or desire to ‘out’ themselves as a survivor. If the campaign was meant to show the prevalence of sexual violence, then how can that be true without the stories of everyone?
- 2) Reconceptualization: Looking at the #metoo campaign, I found that the words ‘#metoo’ fails to empower women, but instead, creates a vulnerable label and barrier upon them. Through reconceptualization, rhetors can analyze the distinction between men and

women, as well as define clear lines between what is and isn't seen. With this viral hashtag, there is so much that isn't accounted for. Not only are the survivors' experiences undervalued, but they also aren't heard or seen. These violent experiences are taken, morphed, and utilized in a viral social media platform. We are unable to make a distinction between their experiences and the two word hashtag.

- 3) Gender Diversity: This campaign fails to account for multiple groups in the community including the LGBTQ community, women of color, the male population, and anyone else who doesn't identify as a white privileged feminist. This social media campaign fails to identify the prevalence of the problem, as well as validate the experience of the survivor. This hashtag created muted voices, and masked violence.
- 4) Oppression and Liberation: Although intended to liberate women from the bounds of sexual assault, harassment, and violence, this movement created a barrier flooded with vulnerability and oppression for women. Survivors of sexual assault are unable to be liberated when this hashtag is creating a harmful label for them. It puts them in a vulnerable position with no course of action. Tarana Burke created this movement to be exactly that, a **movement**. She wanted to spark social change, not just tweet about it. Unfortunately, what was meant to be a liberation from the prevalence of sexual violence, was instead an oppression of vulnerability and privilege.

Throughout the #metoo viral hashtag campaign, the original message was lost and misconstrued. The movement became something unrecognizable, unable to reach social change. A label of vulnerability was created through this hashtag, and the movement was at a standstill. In the end, what exactly is this hashtag communicating to survivors, and how is this being viewed from a sexual assault, prevention, and awareness perspective? If we are excluding so

many vital groups in the community, how are we truly addressing this problem. The hashtag is failing to meet the needs of the survivors, as well as failing to properly represent the individuals facing these battles. Save the human being behind the hashtag, not the tweet.

Reference and Annotated Bibliography

Adams, C. J. (1990). *The sexual politics of meat* (pp. 63-82). New York, NY: Continuum.

In this particular section of Carol Adam's book, she speaks heavily about muted voices and masked violence. With this concept comes the idea of the "absence of death". We are unable to unveil or even recognize what the true meaning of the message is. That with language, comes death, absence, and silence of someone or something, somewhere. She goes onto explain how language upholds oppression as well as liberation for women. I looked at this concept through the lens of how survivors voices were silenced through this hashtag.

Bennett, J. (2017, November 30). The #MeToo moment. In *The New York Times*. Retrieved December 6, 2017.

Jessica Bennett describes the recent breaking news of sexual assault(s) throughout Hollywood. She speaks heavily about the allegations of each perpetrator, as well as each scandal that unfolds. This article took a closer look at Harvey Weinstein's allegations from start to finish and where the viral hashtag is headed. This article claimed that the hashtag was a vehicle used for survivors to share their stories. I took this article into account because although it was a vehicle used to shed light and prevalence on the issue as well as be a storyteller, two words don't get that message across. This article was meant to support the campaign, but in the wrong manner.

Borchers, T. (2006). *Rhetorical theory: An introduction* (pp. 43-50). Illinois: Waveland Press.

In Borchers chapter titled "Rhetoric as Persuasion", I looked particularly at the canon of arrangement. In the section of arrangement, Borchers describes arrangement as one of the most important components to a speech. Without proper order and construction of a speech, we can lose resonance and effectiveness. Borchers also emphasizes the importance of highlighting the

main two components of a speech: the subject and the demonstration of it. Without properly demonstrating our subject, the evidence becomes useless and ineffective for the audience.

Aristotle claims that “one who asserts, must prove”, signifying that if we are going to make a statement and prove our argument, then we must have proper evidence as well as be able to demonstrate our argument. The arrangement, or structure and order to a speech, can make or break our argument. Order helps the audience follow along, it helps our messages resonate, and helps us to understand the importance of our speech.

Butler, J. (1997). *Excitable speech* (pp. 1-41). New York & London, NY: Routledge.

In Butler’s description of linguistic vulnerability, she states the restraints and bounds that language has. Through society comes linguistic beings, and we are shaped, formed, and bound by language because of it. I looked specifically at this portion of her book because of the vulnerability the hashtag ‘metoo’ has. What meaning, value, and identity it holds for survivors and the intent behind the language. Although not intended to oppress, this linguistic choice and movement created a label within the survivor community. Butler identifies the restraints of language and the effect on humans as a whole.

Foss, S. K., & Griffin, C. L. (1995). Beyond persuasion: A proposal for an invitational rhetoric. *Communications Monographs*, 62(1), 2-18.

*Primary work and cited within Borchert 2006.

Garcia, S. E. (2017, October 20). The woman who created #MeToo long before hashtags. In *The New York Times*. Retrieved December 6, 2017.

Garcia speaks heavily about where the #metoo campaign started, the founder, and the flaws that surfaced early on. She mentions the backlash Hollywood received from women of color, because this movement was taken from them and created into something completely

different. Garcia touches upon women of color coming fourth and mentioning that we can't pick and choose the times we speak up and the times we don't. Although this movement was meant in good will, it caused a divide between communities, and failed to resonate with larger portions of different communities. Garcia goes on to explain the depth in which the term 'metoo' was changed and altered.

Santiago, C., & Criss, D. (2017, October 17). An activist, a little girl and the heartbreaking origin of 'Me too'. In *CNN*. Retrieved December 6, 2017.

Santiago and Criss focus on Tarana Burke's reaction to the viral tweet and her thoughts on the matter. She focuses on not stopping at a viral hashtag, but rather creating a movement from that hashtag. This concept and idea was never meant to stand still, it was meant to create resources for survivors, change sexual assault behaviors, and recognize this problem is so much bigger than us. Criss and Santiago went on to explain the depth to which Burke hoped this movement would become, why it started, and where it's going. Tarana re establishes the purpose for the movement, her nonprofit, and what this call to action looked like for her.