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Social media platforms are able to establish online sexual harassment communities within the social media and communities' stream, to provide significant, necessary support to sexual harassment victims and change the political and social system.

Abstract

Social media platforms are able to establish online sexual harassment communities, such as the 'Me Too' community that provide significant, necessary support to sexual harassment victims and change both the political and social system. This is because users can both consult and share their stories globally with others, both synchronously and asynchronously, from the comfort of their homes. This experience allows them to disclose personal experiences and stand up for the oppressed in the same situation. It also allows them to maintain their privacy, which has been established through social media through 'anonymity'.

Key Terms: Community/Communities. Online Support. Sexual Harassment. Me Too Movement. Network. Me Too.

Victims of sexual harassment require support in order for them to voice their opinions in order to eradicate harassment/assaults in the future (Frangonikolopoulos, C. A., & Chapsos, I. 2012). Due to the magnitude of such situations, users may not feel a level of comfort in disclosing such confidential information with families and friends. Therefore, this essay aims to discuss whether social media platforms such as Twitter are able to establish online sexual harassment communities to provide the necessary support and change the political and social system. This statement comes under the stream of 'social media and communities'. This is applicable as this essay discusses the communities that have stemmed from social media platforms.

Social media has become revolution worldwide. It has become one of the more distinctive communication and mobilization channels for activists to engage with, due to the plethora of social network channels available online (Frangonikolopoulos, C. A., & Chapsos, I. 2012). This essay will expound on the progressing relationship between

social media and communities in relation to the 'Me Too movement' which stemmed from the community attained through social media, specifically Twitter. 'Me Too' was established through the participatory culture offered by social media platforms, and initiated by Tarana Burke (Movement, M.T. 2018). Following the countless allegations against Harvey Weinstein, this became a media sensation for woman who have been sexually abused and mistreated within their workplace (White, R., 2018). Thus, social media platforms are able to establish online sexual harassment communities to provide significant, necessary support to sexual harassment victims and change the political/social system.

In 2011, social media platforms began operating as an 'accelerating agent' (Frangonikolopoulos & Chapsos, I. 2012), facilitating online discussions, organizing protests which, in turn led to a movement empowering women to express and voice their opinions with liberty. The features offered by social media platforms enables anonymity discussions which allows users to feel more secure when expressing themselves, which leads to a wider community online. Furthermore, social media platforms are revolutionizing the way users communicate with each other through the increased exposure of highly stigmatized issues prevalent in society today (Manikonda, L., Beigi, G., et. al. 2018). The plethora of platforms available today allow individuals to maintain privacy whilst empowering users to disclose their opinions/stories regarding issues that are often overlooked in society. This has become more apparent in circumstances such as disclosing opinions on highly stigmatized and 'taboo' issues such as – mental health, cancer and sexual abuse. Sexual abuse has become significantly prevalent in today's community, despite being continuously disregarded (Manikonda, L., Beigi, G., et. al. 2018). However, self-disclosure on social media platforms have essentially become a significant part of each individual's social life. Self-disclosure allows users to "reveal personal information to others" (Ma, X., Hancock, J., & Naaman, M. 2016), and this can both socially beneficial and intrinsically rewarding. Disclosing information publicly – especially online requires vulnerability from users, which can

either result in a support community or negative consequences – as a result, some social media platforms allow anonymity when disclosing. Platforms that provide anonymity and allow communities to engage with each other around a shared experience/environment are crucial online spaces for individuals to disclose sensitive issues, whilst receiving support from other users without the ascribed risks that accompany identified disclosures. Examples of platforms offering anonymity includes: Reddit, 4/Chan and Facebook groups and Twitter. These platforms allows the identities of users to be hidden through the use of groups, excluding the user’s names and secreting anonymous accounts (Andalibi & Haimson, et, al., 2018). Online support forums have been in use for many years due to the functions served, as a result of anonymity. According to Manikonda & Beigi (2018), each year on average, there are 321,500 victims of sexual abuse in the US alone. Although, this has been a neglected conversation, they are currently being had on social media, as a result of providing a safe online space for self-disclosure (Manikonda & Beigi, et. al. 2018). Social media has become crucial today, as a result of the rapid growth in globalization – influencing today’s media culture. The relationship between media and its audience has progressed in this age of digital media where the role of readers is being redefined as two major concepts – participatory media and participatory culture has been introduced (Wong, 2012). The participatory culture has allowed users to not only ‘consume’ the content online, but allows them to ‘produce’ content as well. This is reinforced on Twitter as users are able to ‘tweet’ in order to express themselves, whereas initially, users were not able to produce content. The importance of globalization – culturally, technologically and economically entailed that it was compulsory for the media and social media to be able to provide news globally, as it has become inevitably significant to societies and communities.

One of the benefits provided by social media is the ability for individuals and societies to connect online, eliminating the limits of time and space (Wong, 2012) - also known as ‘space of flows’. This challenges the traditional concepts of intercultural communication

(Wong, 2012) as now users are able to communicate on a local, national and global scale, allowing users to reach a wider audience. Since the 1990's, there has been a widespread of discussions regarding internet activism and how media have been used effectively by various political and social movements (Kahn & Kellner, 2004).

Globalization and the progression in digitalization has allowed information to be easily accessible globally, which has become a substantial factor when determining how audiences use and interact with media in society as the power that comes with it is immense. This is evident through the various social movements that have been initiated as a result. This essay will explore the Me Too movement, putting emphasis on the community that has been established.

The Me Too movement stemmed from the hashtag “#metoo” on Twitter by Alyssa Milano, an actor and critic of Winstein. This was done with the intent of signifying the issue of abuse, which resulted in women speaking up about their stories of sexual abuse. This further paved the way for conversations regarding power imbalance and behavior of men. The hashtag precipitated over 12m posts on a myriad of social media platforms from, Facebook, Twitter to snapchat and other platforms (Movement, M. T. 2018). Though issues on sexual assault have always been prevalent prior to 2006 – it was not until 2017, that this movement escalated and encouraged individuals globally to voice their opinions and personal stories on social media platforms in order to obtain justice for these woman and themselves. This led to a community on Twitter through the use of the hashtag where woman who were in support of each other were able to stimulate an environment of reassurance and support for one another. Communities are defined as ‘social groups of any size whose member resides in a specific locality, share government, and often have a common cultural and historical heritage or share similar interests’ (Movement, M.T. 2018).

The progression of social media has allowed societies to form where we are part of what is known as the ‘global village’, a concept introduced by McLuhan which states that the world has ‘shrunk’ as a result of digital and social media (Dixon, 2019). The idea of the

'global village' insinuates an online environment where users feel comfortable in sharing their experiences online in this community as users are able to exchange cultural beliefs with the technological advancements. This is evident through the hashtag revolution on twitter where celebrities have started resorting to twitter to come out and raise awareness through self-disclosure which has changed the world, both socially and politically.

The movement stimulated a community online, which can be explored in relation to Benedict Anderson's (1991) work on 'imagined communities'. He argues "even the smallest nation will never physically interact, or meet up in the offline world, yet in the minds of each member lives the image of their communion" (Kanno, Y., & Norton, B. 2003). This is applicable as the movement stemmed from Twitter – resulting in a phenomenon in terms of achieving political and social change, however, the majority of the community affiants have never interacted offline due to being connected virtually on a global scale. Imagined communities were initially employed to discuss the creation of the nation and user's identities. Nevertheless, social media use special symbols that allows for the creation of imagined online communities similar to Anderson's – comprising of specific characteristics shared by users, languages and a common interest among the users (Kavoura, A. 2014). In relation to Twitter, the form of engagement utilized is the 'retweet', 'favorite', 'hashtags' and the use of one word to identify and share ideas and Boyd (2010) argues that, retweeting is a means by which participants can engage in conversations (Kavoura, A. (2014). Nonetheless, the support shown to each over by each user who have endured sexual harrassment is incomparable. Twitter is a paradigm of social media, and, as proven to be one of the significant platforms where users are permissible to interact with each other on stigmatized and obscene issues in order to raise awareness, as Twitter allows for "a public interplay of voices which gives rise to an emotional sense of shared conversational context" (Weller, K et. Al. 2014). This has also been possible due to the number of internet consumptions today. More than 4.33 billion users were actively engaged with the internet in 2019,

which is more than 50 percent of the population and the active users are in fact increasing significantly (Statista. 2019). This allows the audiences to interact with each other on a wider scale to raise awareness for the same cause, making it more effective. Not only has social media allowed initiation towards social change with the hashtag, it has led to more substantial events in the offline world as well, for example: protests. As a result, thousands of both men and women marched the streets of Los Angeles in support of the victims who have encountered sexual harassments (Pengelly, 2018). This led to #metoo being tweeted more than 19 million times in 85 different countries – especially, in countries like Japan – where issues such as rape, was considered taboo in the society, have now initiated conversations on the issue (Brown, D. 2018). Nevertheless, the movement further exposed high profile directors and politicians who have misused their position and power – reinforced by events in Egypt, where the leader of Arab Spring was obligated to resign due to sexual allegations. This prompted resignations of ministers and politicians in Hollywood who were involved as a result (Kurian, 2019). Social media has resulted in both social and political changes within the law systems, resulting in nine members of the Congress party having to either resign or declined to re-run for elections in the US after being charged for sexual harassment. The cases illustrated has shown that the movement has influenced politics and society in many constructive ways, and, without social media enabling communities in support of each other, the changes that have been made would not have been possible. Butler and Diaz (2016) states that the success of the movement is a result of its central focus of sexual harassment, as, this is not only concrete and discrete in its manifestation, but it is also visual. Butler & Diaz (2016) also argues that the visual emphasis is what allows the movement to be suitable to the internet-based activism. While social media provides platforms for developing collective identity and for creating a cohesive movement ideology that could possibly mobilize new participants, it is equally significant to explore the constraints that social media can play on the mobilization for and engagement in achieving a collective action. This includes unreliable information being spread across platforms, leading to outraged mobs, lack of

privacy or even uncontrollable protests. Therefore, it is vital to ensure the validity and facts on causes before becoming activists for it. Nonetheless, it is important to take into account that social media does not always elucidate a positive role for promoting activism and social movement participation. Youmans and York (2012) highlights how “social media tools that facilitate protest can also be used by repressive regimes and their supporters to dampen and disrupt opposition” (Mundt, M., Ross, K., & Burnett, C. M. 2018). An example being the concept of ‘censorship’ which prevents certain communities from being established, as a result of the hegemony instilled within politicians and governments in the majority of the countries under the authoritarian regime (Mundt, M., Ross, K., & Burnett, C. M. 2018).

Social media has proven to be crucial in relation to social movements and establishing communities as the majority of social movements/unrests stem from social platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Furthermore, media technologies and new media also play a significant role as without the widespread communication and the participation culture, individuals would not have been able to communicate and share their stories online, nor would their stories have global access. While new media has been assimilated into every affluent individual’s daily lives and blurred the line between consumers and producers, it has become inevitable to share stories and influence communities on social platforms in order to make a change in the world, politically and socially, which is evident through the case study analyzed. To conclude, without social media and the benefits it provides – hashtags, groups, pages etc. and the participatory culture, although communities would be effective, media platforms increases the efficiency and effectiveness of the online communities, and therefore, it has becoming significant and is the grassroots when intending to socially make a difference.

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