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| The Effects of Systemic Neoliberalism on the #MeToo Movement |
| Abstract: The role of the citizen and consumer in America has become integrated overtime and transformed under the neoliberal system. In neoliberal societies, politics and civic engagement has been reduced to a marketplace driven by corporations, philanthropists, NGO’s and celebrities. Citizens become brands and commodities in themselves and must revolve their political and social engagement around what will increase their value. This has further become distorted and reinforced in the open and unfettered landscape of social media. How effectively citizens engage in social movements in the online world needs to be analyzed against historical and systemic neoliberal pressures and influences. The goal is to evaluate if citizens can engage in activism on social media to share common stories that connect the body politic and inspire local resistance to provide meaningful change in the private, political and social realm; all within the neoliberal system.  The recent #MeToo movement launched on Twitter is examined as a case study.  Me Too Movement; Neoliberalism; Social Media; Activism |

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**Introduction**

In October 2017, sexual harassment became the forefront of national and global conversation when Alissa Milano shared the hashtag MeToo on Twitter. Milano suggested that if every woman wrote ‘Me Too’ as a status that has been sexually harassed or assaulted than the scope of the problem might be revealed (Leskin 2017). In the aftermath of Milano’s tweet such a thing was accomplished, as millions of women and men shared their stories with the hastag ‘MeToo” reaching 1.7 million people over 85 countries (Park 2017). Though the origins of the Me Too movement do not start Milano on Twitter, but activist Tarana Burke.

As reported, the point of inspiration of the #MeToo was in 1996 when Burke was having a conversation with a young girl while Burke was working as youth camp director (Santiago and Criss 2017). The young girl was relaying a tragic story of the horrible things that her mother’s boyfriend was doing to her and Burke at the time redirected her to a counselor that she felt could help the young girl better. Burke states during the encounter “I will never forget her face. The shock of being rejected, the pain of opening a wound only to have abruptly forced closed again- it was all on her face…I watched her put her mask back on and go back into the world like she was all alone and I couldn’t even bring myself to whisper…me too (2018).”

In neoliberal societies, politics and civic engagement has been reduced to a marketplace driven by corporations, philanthropists, NGO’s and celebrities. Citizens become brands and commodities in themselves and must revolve their political and social engagement around what will increase their value. This has further become distorted and reinforced in the open and unfettered landscape of social media. How effectively citizens engage in social movements in the online world, such as #MeToo, needs to be analyzed against systemic neoliberal pressures and influences. The goal of this is to evaluate if citizens can engage in activism on social media to share common stories that provide meaningful change within the neoliberal system.

**Literature Review**

**Historical Reflections: Citizen Consumer and Commodity Activism**

Even before the systemic integration of neoliberalism, material consumption has been an integral part of America. The role of citizen and consumer has been juxtaposed as opposites, where the citizen has a relationship with the government taking on duties to gain rights and privileges whereas the consumer is an individual who concerned with indulgent material consumption (Cohen 2003). However, the history of citizenship in America has grown in and been shaped by the constantly pressuring consumer culture. As citizens began to view themselves also as consumers they started to fight for their rights to be as such. This was through various consumer movements and commodity activism. In the past several decades neoliberalism and patterns in product marketing has significantly shifted the original roles of citizen-consumer and commodity-activism.

There are three distinct and competing “ideal-type” of citizen consumers in traced by Lizabeth Cohen (2003). The period around the New deal and World War II show the prevalence of the purchaser consumer, which revolved around individual self-interest in the market due to the “ameliorative effects of aggregate purchasing power (Cohen 2003)”. In Postwar America, there was a gradual but significant shift to the idea of *purchaser as citizen*, which had a twofold outcome. The first is that the consumer helped the nation by contributing to a flourishing economy in the “consumers’ republic” dependent upon mass consumption, thus showing the political power of the consumer (Cohen 2003). The second aspect is that during this period the American Dream fueled the idealized goal of middle-class status not only of Americans, but also of the vast amounts of immigrants coming into the country, in other words “one’s citizenship and belonging came to hinge on the ownership and display of goods and products (Wilson, 2018a).” The third type of citizen consumer was a blend of *consumer/citizen/taxpayer/voter* who retained the self-interestedness of New Deal citizen-consumers and the foundation of political power present in postwar citizen-consumers, but lost their collective ideality.

Along with shifts in the citizen consumer, there were drastic shift in the role of consumer movements and commodity activism. Earlier forms of commodity activism transitioned from larger political goals to being about the consumers benefiting themselves (Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee 2012). The shift in marketing products to the masses, the rising importance of branding, and deregulation and privatization popular in the 1980’s is related to the transition in commodity activism. Seeking alternatives to mass marketing, branding niche markets for particular consumers based on such things as race, gender, age, and economic status lead to financial gain for marketers and as a result to segmentation of the masses and social differentiation. Consumption once reinforced the unity of the masses, and now it led to their separation. Previously consumer movements sought the government as an ally and protector of individual's consumer rights. In the background of massive inflation and a stagnant economy, the government stopped encouraging consumer demands and unemployment limited the extra spending of individuals and families. Two policies, deregulation and privatization, promoted by various presidents, were also championed by many businesses at war with the consumer movement. They argued this shift would yield consumers lower prices, so long as the businesses has the flexibility of a freer market. Nevertheless, where did that leave the citizens identity as a consumer?

**Citizens, Activism, and Social Media under Neoliberalism**

Citizens, consumer patterns and activism did not just face a significant shift under neoliberalism; they faced a distortion. The faith in market order undermined the democratic idea of popular sovereignty, as a result neoliberalism “enterprises democracy”, in other words it privatizes it (Wilson 2018a). In neoliberal societies politics and civic engagement has been reduced a marketplace driven by corporations, philanthropists, NGO’s and celebrities. The citizens themselves become brands and commodities and must resolve their political and social engagement around what will increase their value. Neoliberalism forced a series of detrimental shifts in activism; citizens shaping and running social movements through grassroots activism to nonprofit and private funding and meaningful and socially transformative agendas to narrowly defined focus on equality within the neoliberal system. (Spade 2011). Essentially the privatization of politics makes it so every struggle and problem we have can be solved in some way by the market.

The heightened importance of branding to increase our value that came out of not only neoliberalism but also the historical shift in commodity activism, has had detrimental effects on how we view ourselves as citizens and engage in social movements. While neoliberalism is all about individualism, it is solely in the sense of individual responsibility, not viewing citizens as unique and complex. It is up to the individual to secure their place in society and if they fail, they are to blame. Thus, those on top have the true power, no longer the body politic (Spade, 2011). Individuals view those who gain wealth as deserving of it and therefore they want to become them. Under neoliberalism, they theoretically have the freedom and choice to do so, so long as they work hard enough. While people may be engaging in social movements, they are basing them off superficial choices (Hearn 2012). Bringing about the contemporary form of the citizen consumer and commodity activism, which entails social involvement centered on how well one can brand themselves as a commodity (Hearn 2012)

The Hollywood celebrity, “defined by ever-increasing levels of public visibility, flexibility, cross-promotional capacity, and profit potential", is the “paradigmatic model” in branding culture and for contemporary selfhood (Hearn 2012). The extremely public nature of the celebrity means that they can garner attention for political issues, possibly making them an agent of political change, but since celebrities are a commodified brand in popular culture, this potentially negate their political power (Mukherjee 2012). Since the celebrity is the epitome of what neoliberal culture can produce, the movements, causes, and products supported by the them are reproduced in the context of the individual. To be successful they need to be like the celebrity and imitating what they do, therefore supporting the same causes. As pointed out by Alison Hearn, the question remains as to whether the cause or the celebrity benefits most (2012).

Now using social media individuals can now promote a certain image online, similar to the celebrities they praise. John Michael Jacob points out how social media, like neoliberalism, has reconfigured ordinary relationships while replicating many existing social divisions and hierarchies present in society through many conventional state and political mechanisms (Roberts 2014b). We now have unfettered access and ability to engage with friends, family, celebrities, politicians, and even corporations. We only put out our perfected brand on our social media platform and engage with others perfected brands, what is left out in some cases is the shared knowledge of the struggle of being human. Thus, this process reinforces the neoliberal system in our online world.

Social media can be tool to get people involved in the democratic process by developing rapid lines of communication, providing the necessary platform for getting people involved in grassroots movements (Roberts 2014a). Social media has become inherently associated with activist spreading their messages, as it provides an open and alternative space. This makes it not limited to one geographic region, transitioning local or national movements to global movements. The systemic integration of neoliberalism in the 1980’s has made its way into the digital platform, undermining it as tool to regulate the behavior of society through new modes of surveillance (Roberts 2014a). Just as it is open to citizens to engage in social change, it is open to the state, corporations, and other to pursue a market capitalist agenda.

**The Social, the Political, and the Private**

The shifts in historical and societal trends outlined above can be understand in the larger context of the overlap between the social, political, and private realms. Hannah Arendt gives a clear picture of what these is distinct but overlapping realms are. She paints society as a hybrid between the political and the social where most people spend large parts of their lives (Ardent, 1959). Thus, the political realm of society is that which can in one way be defined by legal enforcement (Ardent 1959). When we are driven into the social realm, for various reasons, we are faced with the reality that is not fueled by personal uniqueness but the difference among people and the groups they associate with (Ardent 1959). The private realm is ruled by exclusiveness based on our own happiness and personal uniqueness (Ardent 1959). Ardent highlights the importance of learning how to keep certain things that are accepted in the social realm from creeping into the political and private realms where they can be detrimental (Ardent 1959). In our current state, her warning has become reality.

The historical trends in commodity activism and citizen consumers show the norm of consumption creeping from the social realm. In Postwar America mass consumption takes over the political realm when it became a political power and ideal of citizenship. Consumption took over the private realm when marketing of products began to segment the masses, based on race, gender, age, and socioeconomic status, which defined people’s private identities in terms of products. Neoliberalism in the 1980’s defined the value of everything in the social realm, from business to workers, in terms of the market and defined the political sphere by politicians putting into practice deregulation and privatization. To sustain the neoliberal system, the inherent identity of the individual needed to be transformed. The idea of private realm is defined by the neoliberal ideas of individual responsibility, self-branding, and the imitation of those who do have power. We must take blame if we fail to situate ourselves in good position in society because we personally failed to show our value to the market. With the advent of social media, we now have an effective platform to brand ourselves as commodities and base our political and social engagement around what will aid our brand. The inherent open nature of social media now makes any distinction between the social, political, and private realm meaningless.

**Where do we go from here?**

The literature shows a strong trend towards finding ways to combat the ill-effects of neoliberalism. In general terms Wilson identifies three commons things society needs in the crisis of neoliberalism; common stories, common reason, common horizons (2018b). These three commonalities encourage the same end goal, fighting narcissistic-individualism and forced competition, and instead promoting a fight for the common good. Of course, these goals are in general terms, and require specific action to take place. Though as shown before social media can be a tool for the spread of neoliberalism, it can be, if used properly, a tool to hinder it. Hester Bear demonstrates how three Twitter platforms were used to spread the individual stories of women that demonstrated a collective experience, fired up the body politic to combat neoliberalism (2015). The nature of social media allowed this movement to not be limited to one geographic region and the digital world aid in the spread of messages beyond location to fulfill the three common goals identified by Wilson. (Bear, 2015).

How effectively citizen engage in social movements in the online world needs to be analyzed against historical and systemic neoliberal pressures and influences. The importance is to understand that these influences will not be completely removed because they have become so ingrained, and to remain critical of their inherent effects. Currently it would be infeasible for political and social engagement online to occur with no mediation from the neoliberal system, thus change will occur with the system itself. The goal is to evaluate if citizens can engage in activism on social media to share common stories that connect the body politic and inspire local resistance to provide meaningful change in the private, political and social realm; all within the neoliberal system

**Methodology**

This scope of the analysis will cover the recent #MeToo Movement that gained popularization on Twitter. Most of the focus will include the original founder Tarana Burke and the role celebrities and Hollywood played in the movement. News source, such as *Time* magazines “Person of the Year” article, and various papers written, including a content analysis done by Lydia Manikonda, Ghazaleh Beigi, Huan Liu, and Subbarao Kambhampati of use of the #MeToo on Twitter and metoo thread of Reddit, will serve to provide depth and direction to the analysis.

Wilson defines common stories as ones “that allow use to see ourselves as part of a broader social whole that threads our live together; stories that enable us to claim our interdependency, interconnection, and shared vulnerabilities (2018b).” These common stories should lead to common reason which is “new forms of cultural power adequate to holding new social worlds together” allowing use to see the individual and the collective together (Wilson 2018b). When common stories set in motion common reason, they are perpetuated through common horizons which occur when we “construct common political horizons against neoliberal hegemony” and “build common movements against precarity (Wilson 2018b)” The goal is to evaluate if citizens can engage in #MeToo movement on social media to share common stories that inspire common reasons and common horizons, all within the neoliberal system

**Analysis**

The following quote from Time Magazines 2017 Person of the Year speaks to nuances of the #MeToo movement, “Movie stars are supposedly nothing like you and me. They're svelte, glamorous, self-­possessed. They wear dresses we can't afford and live in houses we can only dream of. Yet it turns out that—in the most painful and personal ways—movie stars are more like you and me than we ever knew (Zacherak, Dockterman, Sweetland Edwards 2017).” Celebrities are “svelte, glamorous, self-possessed” and just “like you and me.” While these two things may seem diametrically opposed, they occur at the same time. People “just like you and me” are also full of conditioned contradictions. On one hand we idealize celebrities, are individualistic, and competitive on the hand as a unified and collective front we are a force we can accomplish meaningful change. The key to understanding the #MeToo movement is to take into consideration all of these contradictions. While it is important to remain cognizant of our differences, as they do play a role in the way we live our lives, our commonalities are the key to fighting systemic neoliberal pressures.

**Common Stories, Reasons, and Horizons**

To reiterate, common stories are what allow our precarious individual experiences to be part of a larger whole that shows our commonality and collectiveness. With the popularization of the phrase through Twitter, Burke’s disappointment in not being able to say “me too” to that young girl was rectified. The #MeToo movement gains it strength from the fact that it’s spread was fueled by men and women sharing their common stories about sexual assault and harassment, allowing us the opportunity to engage in activism as citizens and not consumers. In the aftermath of Milano’s tweet women and men promptly responded with their stories. From actress Alison Tolaman tweeting “#MeToo – Crowded tram at Disney, sat a row behind my family. Man kept his hand on my thigh the whole ride, stroking the fine hair there. Think I was 11 but scared to confirm dates of that trip with my mom, because I never told anyone. Us to. All of Us” to “ I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve lied and told a guy I have because he wouldn’t take a simple “no” for an answer #MeToo”, one actresses response to Milano’s tweet ,“Me Too. Hasn’t every woman???”, shows the feeling of connection between those who shared the hashtag (Leskin, 2017). The posts analyzed by Manikonda display the solidarity that swept the internet, as on average posts with the hashtag experienced more social engagement than regular tweets and self-posts on Reddit only received up-votes suggesting they users were positively engaging (2018) Research found that conversation surrounding the #MeToo on Twitter along with metoo subreddit, included many personal experiences with assault and encouragement to fight against it (Manikonda et al, 2018). These platforms are benefitting users as tools to share their vulnerabilities with one another and give each other a sense of solidarity.

Our idealization of celebrities in this case, aided the sharing of our common stories. This breaks some of the barriers between the world of celebrities, solely as the paradigmatic model we should aspire to be under the capitalist system and brings them into the realm of a unified collective. With these shared stories we are no longer driven to compete as individuals to prove our power and worth in terms of the market system. We are now driven by our common experiences that display a larger societal issue that is reinforced by the alienating factors of the neoliberal system. With the recognition of this larger societal issue and newly identified unity, our engagement as active citizens across class can remedy this problem, so long as our desire to achieve a common goal is the fuel.

The stories with the #MeToo should inspire new forms of cultural power. While overall there appears to be a mutual desire for change this is where the movement starts to fracture. These common stories are meant to promote common reason where can define the individual and collective through one another. The celebrities who support this cause are also trying to spread and promote such ideas. For their engagement to appear to more than just a tactic or motive increase their personal brand, they have continually given recognition to Tarana Burke and let her voice be heard. There is some criticism of the cooptation of the #MeToo movement, especially since the popularization of this movement started with a celebrity and not the founder herself. However, the celebrities who truly believe in this cause have tried to rectify this by continually using their platform and public place in society to give room for Burke’s voice.

Since we will still look to celebrities, it is of the upmost importance that they constantly keep pushing the #MeToo to be a collective cause. The cooptation of this movement solely for celebrity branding will be replicated on the individual level by their followers. if the movement progresses for superficial reasons by vast amounts of social media followers any collective unity will become shallow or dissipate. While those who are engaging in the #MeToo for meaningful reasons and for those who would benefit from the collective action fall trap to being reduced to just another follower sharing it for the publicity. This would not only perpetuate a superficial movement, it would reinforce the neoliberal effects of social media which make our engagement with the online world only a medium to brand ourselves as commodities.

As always “In politics, truth tends to be whatever those holding the bullhorn say it is” and in the case of the #MeToo movement the bullhorn is being held by Hollywood (Wypijewski 2018). While many in Hollywood are attempting to support the #MeToo for the broader good, they need to recognize that their stature in society comes with complications. This was something that Burke herself noticed about the Oscar’s event, when she stated, “I think the focus has to shift from Hollywood at this point, because there are millions of people around the world asking for help (Buckley 2018).” Celebrities will unintentionally draw focus away from others onto themselves. They need to allow the room for people like Tarana Burke to take the lead on the movement, so their celebrity status does make the #MeToo movement a spectacle instead of meaningful grassroots activism. If this happens we are becoming consumers of a movement not citizens actively engaging in it.

The start of the #MeToo movement and the ability to use social media to share common stories is successful, but when it comes to common reasons there is more difficulties. “Folk’s think it’s about naming and shaming, about taking down powerful men. But they’re wrong,” Burke stated at Varieties Power of Women event, because she is pointing out that this movement is about the empowering survivors of sexual abuse (Birtard 2018). The unity of empowerment does not have to solely lie only with those that experienced sexual assault, it can lie with those who are who also support the cause. Everyone, “everyday” people and celebrities, need common reason to be centered on survivors, empowerment, and a transformation away from sexual abuse as a societal norm.

The study by Manikonda et al found that, while mostly supporting victims and focusing on how to combat the issue, conservation also highly focused on the current events at play, such as the various celebrities that were ousted (2018). We are seeing it pulled in two ways, the survivors and the perpetrators. The perpetrators most visualized and publicized are celebrities, so it seems like just another Hollywood scandal, which fractures this movement. There is of course the word “witch hunt” that shows up across the three different parts of Manikonda’s study. The view of the #MeToo movement as a witch hunt to target powerful men is reflective of the broader neoliberal system (2018). We idealize and epitomize celebrities because they are the paradigmatic model. Seeing an individual we have been systemically conditioned to be like get torn from the their position of power will fuel fear. The competitive nature of the neoliberal system tells us that to hold that much power means we proved our worth to the market system and the backlash caused by the #MeToo movement is unfair.

“Like all stories, it exists within a social context” and the social context also being created by the #MeToo movement is a “monster/victim script” that shuts the conversation of how we practice sexual conciseness and confidence and leaves us “cornered in a false debate between belief and blame (Wypijewski 2018). We are putting the powerful men and women that are getting ousted in this movement in the court of public opinion and due the nature of Hollywood this movement is viewed as spectacle by some. The idea of a witch hunt limits us from having a new form of cultural power which making is it so sexual harassment and assault is not merely shrugged off and not a societal norm.

Focusing too much on the perpetrators puts the individual experience back into the center, not the collective experience of millions of individuals. Acting as consumers of the movement, seeing celebrities being stripped of power leaves the viewer thinking “if this can happen to them this can happen to me”. Some of the stories that come out of Hollywood are clear manifestations of long running sexual abuse and harassment, but the reality for many “everyday” people is that their experiences might not lend to such clarity. One drawback of the #MeToo movement is that is has put “ambiguous sexual interactions and harassment in the same box (Wypijewski 2018). There is a push back, in particular from young men, who fear any ambiguous sexual interaction will result in them being blamed for sexual harassment, making them another target of this perceived witch hunt. The power of this narrative should not be underestimated because it reinforces the alienation the neoliberal system put upon it’s citizens.

Though common reasons as fuel for new cultural powers are fractured among the #MeToo, if the movement can keep it’s focus on collective unity it can form common horizons. If we recognize where the movement divides us and try to steer is away from these narratives then we avoid “the ultimate fault line in the neoliberal conjecture” which “is the way it subjects us all to precarity…recognizing this potential for coalition in the face of precarization is the most pressing task facing those who are yearning for a new world (Wilson, 2018).” Acknowledging that we may fall prey to engaging in the movement as consumers instead of citizens, knowing that celebrity co-optation of the movement can occur, and seeing that the focus of induvial perpetrators instead of the empowerment of millions of survivors and supports can make this movement reinforce the neoliberal status quo, will put the power to overcome these things in the hand of those who wish to drive to movement forward. Tarana Burke and her message or the key to survival of the #MeToo movement, she states “It is a mistake to think of this as a moment…Movements are long, and they are built over time. Movements are made of moments (Birtard 2018).” The #MeToo movement has given “folks that have been wearing the fear and shame that sexual violence leaves you with like a scarlet letter” and or now able to com out into the “sunlight” to a collective community (Birtard 2018). Setting out for common horizons, in spite of that may tear it down, is the future of the #MeToo movement.

**Conclusion**

There was light being shined on to the dark shadows of Hollywood. America and the world watched powerful men and women take on sexual predators. They did so by sharing common stories, common reason, and common horizons to combat systemic neoliberalism. It is necessary to recognize the mutually reinforcing and contradictory relationship between Burke’s MeToo and its presence in Hollywood. Acknowledging what can weaken the #MeToo movement will aid in its survival. While it was out of the scope of research for this paper, future research should focus of the idea of delineating the nuances of ambigious sexual experience and sexual harassment. While this paper did not address the #MeToo movement from a gendered or feminist perspective, the examines of these nuances would be best examined in such a way. This paper tried to incorporate men into the conversation of sexual abuse survivors, but there is a feeling that they are left out of the conversation and continued research would benefit from the examination of men’s role within the movement. Just this paper did address the issues from a gendered perspective, it also did not do so form the perspective of race in America, which is important in an important key to understanding the future of the movement and the Tarana Burke’s original message. Overall this paper shows that #MeToo was successful in sharing common stories and if the goal of collective unity is kept in sight, then it can also promote common reasons and horizons to resist and fight the effects of systemic neoliberalism.

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