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“Even if patriarchal sociopathy is more pervasive than we like to imagine, it can be defeated“

- #MeToo as Contentious Politics: Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of Online Articles from 2017 to 2019

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## **Abstract**

*#MeToo stirred the debate about sexual harassment and abuse and its normalization in society. This examination of #MeToo follows the actors, mobilization and trajectory of this latest instance of women's issues going viral. While the hashtag spread globally and throughout many realms, this investigation is focused on the developments in the US from its beginning in October 2017 to July 2019, the end of this research. The application of Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow's theory of contentious politics provides insights into #MeToo and enables the (in)validation of their theory for online contention at the same time. A selection of articles from The New York Times supports the theory-testing and portrays the debate #MeToo caused in a leading online newspaper. Given the overview gained, #MeToo and online activism in general are evaluated on their usability to further feminist causes towards gender equality. Central outcomes are not only the validation of the theory for online contention, but the mainstreaming of discourse on sexual harassment and abuse as well as beginning changes in the US judiciary on the topic.*

*#MeToo regte die Debatte über sexuelle Belästigung und sexuellen Missbrauch und dessen Normalisierung in der Gesellschaft an. Diese Untersuchung von #MeToo folgt den Akteur\*innen, der Mobilisierung und dem Verlauf dieser jüngsten Instanz der weitläufigen Debatte feministischer Themen. Während sich der Hashtag weltweit und in vielen Bereichen ausbreitete, konzentriert sich diese Forschungsarbeit auf die Entwicklungen in den USA von seinem Aufkommen im Oktober 2017 bis zum Ende meiner Forschung im Juli 2019. Die Anwendung von Charles Tilly und Sidney Tarrow's Theorie der streitbaren Politik bietet Einblicke in #MeToo und ermöglicht gleichzeitig die (In)Validierung ihrer Theorie für Online-Konflikte. Eine Auswahl von Artikeln aus der New York Times unterstützt die theoretische Untersuchung und porträtiert die Debatte, die #MeToo in einer führenden Online-Zeitung ausgelöst wurde. Angesichts des gewonnenen Überblicks werden #MeToo- und Online-Aktivismus im Allgemeinen auf ihren Nutzen für weitere feministische Anliegen hin zur Gleichstellung der Geschlechter bewertet. Zentrale Ergebnisse sind nicht nur die Validierung der Theorie für Online-Konflikte, sondern auch die Einbeziehung des Diskurses über sexuelle Belästigung und sexuellen Missbrauch sowie der Beginn von Änderungen in der US-Justiz zu diesem Thema.*

## 1. Introduction

The connection between the online and the offline world sometimes seems blurry. The term ‘visual reality’ suggests that experiences online somehow happen outside of actual reality. In October 2017, however, the rift between online and offline world was crossed with the help of a hashtag unifying the offline experiences of countless women and some men in an online collection. Hashtags are shared terms to help searching for social media content and collecting related posts, creating online debates anyone can join anywhere by using the relevant hashtag (Natividad 2017, 105). The Hollywood actress Alyssa Milano initiated #MeToo in October 2017 after a scandal centered on the film producer Harvey Weinstein became public through investigations by *The New York Times*. Weinstein allegedly sexually harassed and abused women who worked for him over decades and sealed non-disclosure agreements with them if they sued him (Kantor & Twohey 2017). The accusations against Weinstein unleashed a chain reaction in which popular Hollywood actresses not only accused Weinstein but also a number of other powerful men in the industry of sexual harassment and abuse (Kantor and Abrams 2017). Milano then suggested in a Twitter post on October 15, 2017 that all women who experienced sexual harassment and abuse should respond with #MeToo to the post to show the incomprehensible magnitude of the problem of sexual harassment. Milano was, however, not the first to deal with the topic of sexual harassment and abuse on social media. The social organizer Tarana Burke founded the ‘MeToo’ movement already in 2006 as a platform for Women of Color who experienced sexual harassment and abuse. Burke’s intention was to bring women with similar experiences together to heal. She is still active with her platform today (Jaffe 2018, 80).

The reactions to Milano’s call on social media were overwhelming and certainly underlined her claim that this would demonstrate how big the problem of sexual harassment is, especially for women (Khomami 2017). While #MeToo was initiated in the US, the hashtag gained global prominence, e.g. in India, Myanmar (Kristof 2018) and China (Hernández and Zhao 2018). Not only did many women from all kinds of background engage in the online debate but they also developed locally adjusted variants of the hashtag like #BalanceTonPorc (engl.: “Name your pig”) in France and #QuellaVoltaChe (engl.: “This time when”) in Italy (J. Bennett 2017).

#MeToo summarizes a wide range of degrading and abusive experiences from sexual harassment to rape. Victims of all forms of such behavior joined in the hashtag, demonstrating the detrimental effect that gender oppression has on the treatment of women, and some men.

Drawing a line between the different forms of sexual harassment and abuse is difficult and often hampers their legal prosecution (Gash and Harding 2018). Yet, it is not necessary to make such a distinction for the purpose of this research; for one because all these experiences are valid and at most uncomfortable for victims. Furthermore, their exemplification of the magnitude of oppressive behavior against women and some men justifies the collective outrage of #MeToo as well as an investigation of the same.<sup>1</sup>

As the magnitude of sexual harassment became visible online, #MeToo continued to gain prominence and is today, almost two years later, still discussed, written about, and the reason why laws are adjusted and people start to look differently at the issue of sexual harassment and abuse. Incidents such as the all-male nominees for the best director award at the Golden Globes (Smith 2018), and the numerous counter-reactions focusing on threatened masculinity and worries about a prohibitive atmosphere for men to flirt with women fostered #MeToo's relevance for the wider discourse of women's position in society, ranging from equal pay over care work to the debate of toxic masculinity.

Although #MeToo represents experiences of individual women and is thus a narrative of the micro-level gender hierarchies playing out in society, the fact that all participating women endure similar experiences as their everyday reality and the collective size of their posts points at the macro structure underlying sexual harassment (Gash and Harding 2018). Feminist researchers of many disciplines have problematized and analyzed this structure long before #MeToo (Allen 1998; Butler 1999; Collins 2000; Gill 2016; Schuster 2017). The way sexual harassment and abuse is often accepted with a shrug demonstrates the naturalization of a gendered social hierarchy that allows men to treat women in disrespectful ways and even harm them. #MeToo spreading globally supports the assumption that variants of such a gendered hierarchy exist everywhere in the world.

The gendered structures of oppression and of opportunity have caused #MeToo and led to women being its main constituency. Even though I avoid terming #MeToo a movement, it fits some of the definitions of women's movements (Ferree & Mueller 2006, 40f) and #MeToo follows the tradition of former women's movements, even though it should not be measured with the same standards (Gash & Harding 2018, 13). I elaborate on the terminologies of movement and women's movement in Chapter 3. Women's movements are

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term 'sexual harassment and abuse' instead of shortened versions such as 'sexual harassment' in this thesis in order to stress that experiences of sexually degrading behaviour occurs in a wide range of severity. All these experiences are rooted in social structures based on a gender hierarchy. All forms are unacceptable and should be fought and abolished altogether.

not necessarily feminist (Ferree & Mueller 2006, 39), however, I define #MeToo as feminist for the purpose of my research because #MeToo criticizes the effects of an underlying gendered social hierarchy in the everyday lives of women and some men and aims at changing that structure. I elaborate on this in Chapter 2.

The speed and broadness with which #MeToo gained prominence is puzzling: The problems of a gendered hierarchy in society have been discussed for a long time and sexualized and disrespectful treatment of women justified by such a hierarchy is not a new phenomenon. Yet, that a new form of social activism concerning women's issues begins online might not be surprising as the Internet's and online communications' relevance grows constantly. However, the amount of participants and their readiness to share their experiences suggests that #MeToo was the opportunity for complaints fuelled by long built-up anger and disappointment about society's dealing with sexual harassment and abuse. Why was it in October 2017 that a public outcry against sexual harassment took its form in a hashtag? And why have previous hashtags, which have also been termed feminist like #YesAllWomen (Rodino-Colocino 2014) not steered similar levels of participation and debate?

In #MeToo, the participants demand both attention and a change of attitudes concerning sexual harassment and abuse. The hashtag is a coordinated effort in that it is specifically used to show the magnitude of the problem on behalf of women experiencing sexual harassment and abuse. Governments are involved because they sustain and justify the existing gendered hierarchy that allows discrimination of women; they are thus a target of #MeToo on the structural level. Such phenomena that involve collective claim making, contentious action and making demands for change are often categorized as (social) movements, revolutions, nationalism or the like (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 7). Ample theories explaining their origins, developments and outcomes exist, some also covering the relatively new form of online contention. I choose the theory of contentious politics developed by Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow to analyze #MeToo. Contentious politics is a rather open concept inviting the analysis of all kinds of contention without compulsorily categorizing them; it describes "interactions in which actors make claims bearing on other actors' interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators of claims or third parties" (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 7).

Contentious politics, even though a concept applicable to many forms of contention due to its focus on mechanisms and processes rather than criteria categorizing different forms of contention, has not been applied to online contention yet. Tarrow, updating his and Tilly's co-

authored monograph in a second edition after Tilly's passing, reflects on the relevance of the Internet for contentious politics but only briefly applies the concept. By applying their theory to #MeToo, I contribute to its (in)validation for online contention: My thesis furthers the existing research in that it adds another layer of examples for mechanisms and processes of contention specifically concerning online contention identified by Tilly and Tarrow. It (in)validates their theory for an even broader array of contention and contributes to update it to contemporarily relevant events in light of the growing importance of social interaction online. My leading research question therefore is: In how far is contentious politics applicable to online contention and do the same mechanisms and processes work in online as well as offline contention? Two sub-questions nuance this endeavor: First, which aspects of contentious politics are especially relevant in online contention and for #MeToo and why? Second, and subsequently, can the concepts of contentious politics be improved for their application to online contention? The research results should nuance the concepts of Tilly and Tarrow and thereby further a better understanding of modern online contention.

Additionally, I conduct my research on #MeToo with the goal of contributing to the political causes of feminist women's movements to challenge women's structural oppression by men (Ferree & Mueller 2006, 41) and my personal aspiration is to provide research useful to future feminist contention. Another sub-question I engage with is thus how online contention can effectively help feminist causes. By shedding light on the mechanisms and processes enabling #MeToo's large scale, I hope to provide incentives for future feminist movements on how to employ online contention to the best use for feminist causes. Due to #MeToo's recentness, research addressing it is limited so far and the relative scarcity of research from a feminist perspective specifically on online contention presents itself as a gap in the literature regarding the importance of online interaction today.

As my first goal is to apply the theory of contentious politics on #MeToo to investigate its applicability to online contention, the focus of the thesis is not an empirical investigation of #MeToo but a theoretical engagement. I support my theoretical investigations with an exemplary selection of media to illustrate #MeToo's development while going through the different theoretical concepts of contentious politics. I draw on newspaper articles as media examples from *The New York Times* (NYT), a lead medium in the US. An exemplary choice of media does not provide a representative analysis of #MeToo; however, since contentious politics has not been applied to online phenomena, my thesis provides a first attempt at applying the theory. My analysis covers the time period from October 2017 when #MeToo



began until July 2019, when I stopped gathering data for this thesis. An inherent limitation is #MeToo's continuation at the time of writing and its still unfolding consequences. I focus on #MeToo and its reception in the US because it originated and spread from there and to offer a structured and concise application of the theory. This implies to omit an international perspective that would not only provide a wider intersectional perspective but also underline the globalism of the structural problem of sexual harassment and abuse.

For the analysis of online newspaper articles, I employ the method of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA). A combination of the contentious politics approach with FCDA suggests itself because both the theoretical and the methodological approach enable a critical assessment of both #MeToo itself and simultaneously focus on the performative possibilities it offers (Lazar 2007; Tilly and Tarrow 2015). In particular, the explicitly political nature of FCDA and its social emancipatory goals fit my intention to provide a useful analysis of online activism for practical purposes for feminist causes. I rely on Michelle M. Lazar's approach to FCDA, where she defines discourse as a socially constitutive signifying practice (Lazar 2005, 12).

My feminist perspectives as well as my background in political science, sociology and gender studies inform my analysis. By writing from a feminist standpoint, research is not simply a matter of stating facts. As a woman, human being and researcher, I identify with the political goals of feminism to challenge women's structural oppression by men (Ferree & Mueller 2006, 41). This is not to say that I obscure any results to that end but rather that it is on the one hand a personal bias and on the other a conscious acknowledgement that I work within structures that systematically suppress women's views; due to the ever-present influence of these social structures, entirely neutral or objective research is not possible but is always conducted with the background of these structures. In consciously researching from and for a female perspective, my aim is to contribute to a more nuanced view on feminist contention and by analyzing #MeToo as an online phenomenon to demonstrate its potential for future feminist endeavors.

My research is further impacted by my academic background in political science with a focus on European studies, enabling me to research #MeToo from a trans-disciplinary perspective. Regarding my personal background, my inquiries can only reveal a part of the story that #MeToo presents; as a white educated woman from Germany I cannot assume to know what sexual harassment and abuse mean for women (and men) whose identities situate them differently on the intersectional spectrum of marginalization than me. Previous online

debates on harassment and abuse such as #YesAllWhiteWomen have already shown that the specificities of the experiences of people less structurally privileged than white women paradoxically often are the most visible spokespeople and simultaneously ignored and even diminished in the public discourse (Baer 2016; Rodino-Colocino 2014). Further, conducting research on #MeToo in the US from a European perspective can both be an asset and a liability in that it offers insights from a less directly invested perspective while the distance I conduct my research from could also lead to the unconscious omission of important aspects. The scope of the master thesis in general as well as the still unfolding consequences of #MeToo are another limitation. Although I am not able to judge the success of #MeToo eventually, the theory-testing and discovery of mechanisms leading to #MeToo as it is now provide insights into its dynamics that are useful both for further academic research as well as practical issues for feminist causes.

My research can only be one out of many contributions to the discussion of #MeToo and how to employ online strategies such as usage of hashtags to advance the goals of a feminism that makes the world better for everyone, and not just for those already privileged.

In the next chapter, to set direction for the remainder of the thesis, I argue that #MeToo is feminist, first, because it gives the phenomenon itself a status and connected meaning and second, to justify the intended usefulness to feminist causes of this thesis. I then provide an overview of social movement literature, concluding with the state of the art on online movements and hashtag activism. Next, I detail my methodological approach and introduce the theory of contentious politics in detail. I then apply the concepts of contentious politics to #MeToo, including an excursus from online newspaper articles to exemplify the backlash against #MeToo based on a video advertisement and the reactions to it. Lastly, I conclude with a summary of my observations.

## **2. Why #MeToo Is Feminist**

My analysis of #MeToo with the concept of contentious politics is not predisposed to judge whether #MeToo is feminist or not as contention politics is not concerned with categorizing or analyzing ideologies. An analysis helpful to feminist causes as a goal of my thesis therefore warrants a contextualization in feminist debates prior to the application of the theory. I argue that #MeToo is feminist in the following and show the relevance of #MeToo for feminist causes in light of current debates on feminism in gender studies. To that end, I point to three

problems that feminism in its different forms aims to solve and relate them to #MeToo: the gendered power structure in patriarchal societies; accommodating the marginalization women experience through different vectors of oppression such as race and class; and the growing individualization of society.

A gendered power structure determining the ways in which most societies interact today is a common understanding among feminists (Butler 1999; Connell 2015). This power structure is based on a distinction of people by their gender and assigns unequal positions to women and men, establishing a binary gender order for which any other gender than female and male falls outside the norm. In this system of hegemony, where a group of leaders acts in ways that reproduce their dominant position by cultural power and authority, men dominate women. The acknowledgment of a gendered power structure that oppresses women and benefits men should, however, not obscure that feminism, at least the definitions employed in this thesis, generally aim at making life better for everyone. A strong point of such a form of feminism is to acknowledge that patriarchal structures constitute a hardship for many men as well. Even though all men benefit from the patriarchal dividend they gain from the systematic oppression of women, not every individual man holds the same amount of power over every individual woman. Further, not all men possess the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity such as physical strength, which creates a system of social pressure (Connell 2015, 130). Despite a common understanding that feminism is based on a political standpoint that acknowledges this structural oppression of women as a group and explicitly aims at challenging and changing the existing gender hierarchy it is rather useful to speak of feminisms than feminism (Basu 2010; Ferree and Mueller 2006; Martin 1990).

The gendered power structure is not the only hegemonic social system oppressing women and others. Kimberlé Crenshaw, feminist law scholar, developed the concept of intersectionality in 1989 to describe a person's experience of oppression by several vectors of social hierarchy at the same time (Crenshaw 1989). Judith Butler, philosopher and theoretical feminist, built on Crenshaw's work and points out the importance of bringing the struggles against different systems of oppression such as gender, class and race together. Butler emphasizes that feminism tries to achieve political representation for the subjects it speaks for, namely women. Yet, as much as we witness the oppression of women as a group in the patriarchal structures of society based on the gender binary constructed by the same patriarchal structures, we can neither speak of a universal patriarchy nor of women as the universal

subject of feminism: Any woman faces individual problems because her assigned gender is not the only element that defines her identity; other historically constituted systems of oppression like race and class co-determine an individual's position in society. This implies that feminist emancipation from oppressive structures must regard the diverse identities that constitute its subjects (Butler 1999, 4-5).

This focus on uniting oppressed groups is referred to as third-wave feminism (Schuster 2017). The waves concept describes periods during which feminist activity was focused on different topics ranging from the suffragette movement around 1900 to today's discussions about postfeminism; it is a rather Eurocentric perspective on feminist history. Gill identifies several meanings of postfeminism: it can mean a backlash to feminist goals; any form of feminism that developed after the second wave; a feminism aligned with other post-movements as an epistemologically new start; it can imply connections to the third wave; and it can emphasize feminism's intertwinement with neoliberalism today (Gill 2016, 612-613). The term can thus describe both a movement supporting feminist goals as well as one rejecting them.

Even though these simplified depictions can hardly encompass all aspects that feminists engage with, they help to exemplify developments in feminism and the underlying connections that build the preconditions enabling the resonance for and possible success of online campaigns like #MeToo today. An example for the development of one such precondition can be seen in Schuster's investigation of the appropriation of the catchphrase "the personal is political" by third wave feminists, which was originally coined in 1970. Feminists who do not identify with the third wave accuse them of derailing its original meaning by defining it as implying that everyday feminist practices by individual women are political while second wave feminists insisted that their private living situations are political because they are determined by the political system (Schuster 2017, 647). However, Schuster finds that third wave feminists acknowledge that their individual everyday feminism is not sufficient to change the oppressive structures women face. The critique of appropriation of the catchphrase is thus based on a misunderstanding (656).

Taking into account Gill's analysis of the media's perception of feminism, the shift of focus from collective action to everyday individual feminism Schuster finds gains more importance: Gill argues that mainstream media have a tendency "to both trivialize and personalize the issue of sexism" because they frame the issue as an individual and not a

structural problem (Gill 2016, 615). Individual everyday feminism falls into the same pattern as the general individualization of society inherent to neoliberal capitalism (Baer 2016).

#MeToo as an online campaign involving millions of participants deals with the gendered power structure, intersectional identities and social individualization in a feminist way. Firstly, as a campaign whose participants are mainly, though not exclusively, female, it demonstrates the gendered power structure that enables (mostly) men to exercise sexism that oppresses women. Even the fact that it is not only women voicing accusations of sexual harassment is a confirmation of the gendered power structure: As feminine character traits are generally seen as a weakness in a patriarchal society that suppresses women men who feature feminine characteristics are victims in this structure, too (Connell 2015, 131). As their victimhood is based on gender criteria (femininity), it again demonstrates the gendered power structure and that such a widely oppressive system should be abolished to the benefit of all women and many men.

Secondly, the low barriers to enter a hashtag-based online discussion promise that anyone can join the debate (provided they have access to a device with Internet connection), opening up possibilities for members of different social groups to connect and show solidarity with each other, whereas the offline world faces higher barriers such as economic or location-related constraints. Nevertheless, intersectional solidarity in hashtag-activism remains difficult to achieve, as the hashtag #YesAllWhiteWomen that developed in response to #YesAllWomen shows. Rodino-Colocina points out that without “the radical work of creating intersectional solidarity” in feminist mobilization, no hashtag will be able to create the inclusiveness feminism needs to speak unitarily (Rodino-Colocino 2014, 1114). Claiming that #MeToo has overcome these problems would be far-fetched. However, the solidarity that Tarana Burke, the initiator of ‘MeToo’ in 2006 and a Black woman, and Alyssa Milano, the white actress who initiated the hashtag-campaign in 2017, demonstrate by emphasizing that the debate about sexual harassment and abuse should not be centered around a person, and both of them fighting together (Garcia 2017) gives hope for feminist solidarity.

Thirdly, the catchphrase “the private is political” describes a feminist problem, regardless of whether it is understood in the second or third wave way: Both the micro and macro level of analysis matter for a feminist understanding of society. As long as the macro level of society, by which I mean the structural conditions individuals face that are not caused by their individuality other than by their gender (or race and class), is not taken into account, it is impossible to resolve individual people’s problems. What #MeToo does in the first place

is to point out that sexual harassment and abuse is indeed not an individual problem, but a systematic one. As Alyssa Milano intended, the hashtag shows the magnitude of this problem women face. #MeToo is a collection of micro experiences that add up to a macro system of oppression based on gender and the existence of this system is shown by many individual actions, bridging the individual and the collective.

Whether #MeToo is feminist or not is a rather irrelevant issue in the discourse around the hashtag. For example, Linda Hirshman, author of 'Reckoning. The Epic Battle Against Sexual Abuse and Harassment' sees #MeToo as the continuation of the legal and social fight feminists in the US have fought since the 1970s' first cases of prosecution against sexual harassment in the workplace (Hirshman 2019). Reason for the debate is rather, as with previous feminist hashtags, whether #MeToo is the 'right' kind of feminism, especially concerning its intersectionality (Airey 2018; Rodino-Colocino 2014; Thelandersson 2014). Debate among feminists is also stirred by instances when one of their own is accused of sexual harassment and assault, as an *NYT* article shows, reversing the debate positions and even leading feminists like Judith Butler to use the same arguments of victim blaming as male perpetrators (Greenberg 2018). Even though #MeToo is sometimes difficult to classify within feminist values, it stirs debates that can help different forms of feminism to become more integral and an instance of solidarity for all women and men.

### **3. State of the Art**

Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow developed the contentious politics approach, which I use to investigate #MeToo, out of the tradition of social movement theories and research. In the following, I provide an overview of social movement theories and their development over time to demonstrate why contentious politics is the best choice to investigate #MeToo. It is important to keep in mind that Tilly and Tarrow explicitly refuse to categorize phenomena as social movements, revolutions or the like. Analyzing #MeToo with a theory in the tradition of social movement research therefore does not imply that #MeToo is a social movement. Rather the contrary, by employing contentious politics, I evade the pitfalls of categorizations that might be a misfit and instead concentrate on the mechanisms and processes that constitute #MeToo. Before beginning the overview of the literature, it is necessary to acknowledge that trying to provide the most fitting overview of literature for the application to a US case study, most authors I engage with come from the Global North and I am mostly unaware of the

possible intersectional vectors of identity they might possess. With the notable exception of Theda Skocpol and Hannah Arendt, the field of social movement literature in general is rather male-dominated, whereas the scholars of feminist and women's movements studies are almost exclusively female. While this is not a surprising discovery, it is still noteworthy to consider who debates certain topics because different standpoints informed by different identities would provide more diverse viewpoints after all.

### **3.1 Social Movement Theories**

The spread of social movements in countries of the Global North from the 1960s onwards fueled the emergence of a broad body of literature on the topic, which continues to develop until today (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). The term social movements is used to describe a wide body of research, which covers such differing events as revolutions, strikes, nationalism, democratization and social movements in a more narrow sense. In order to summarize all these interactions and start without overly strict limitations of the possible categories, Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly have coined the term contentious politics (4). Tilly and Tarrow emphasize that not all forms of contentious politics qualify as a social movement. According to them, a social movement is a “(1) sustained campaign of claim making; (2) an array of public performances [...]; (3) repeated public displays of worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment [...]; (4) organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities” (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 11). They seem to preclude digital activism from this definition, not only because it is not part of the examples they provide for public performances like demonstrations, marches, petitions and the like, but they specifically wonder whether digital activism “may even be making social movements obsolete” (12).

Just like these authors suggest, and in light of their rejection of digital activism to be defined as a social movement (even though this is probably not their main concern) my intention is not to define #MeToo as a specific form of contentious politics, but instead to focus on which aspects of contention can be found in #MeToo.<sup>2</sup> Different ontological presumptions governed the development of structural (Arendt 1963; Skocpol 1979) and cultural (Selbin 1997; Sewell 1985) theories of social movements, which are also referred to as resource mobilization theory and social constructionist approaches (Buechler 2000). Relational theories of contentious politics can be considered the state of the art (McAdam,

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<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the term social movement is employed in this paper. Its use should not be interpreted in a narrow definitional sense, but rather in a broad sense to describe the occurrence of contentious politics.

Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 22). The relational approach focuses on explaining the connections between different actors of a phenomenon (23). All of the approaches, however, build upon one another, which is why their main postulates are briefly described in the following.

### *Structural Theories*

Theda Skocpol, most well known advocate of structural approaches to revolution, claimed in 1979 that all theories of revolution were preceded and therefore influenced by Marx. At the heart of Marxism lies the idea that revolutions are “class-based movements growing out of objective structural contradictions within historically developing and inherently conflict-ridden societies” (Skocpol 1979, 7). The inherent contradiction in capitalism between who owns capital and who contributes to production with labor power, which Marx diagnosed as the reason for capitalism’s eventual destruction, is also present in the three other approaches to revolution Skocpol identifies: aggregate-psychological, systems/value-consensus and political-conflict theories (9). Structural approaches generally stress that social revolutions aim at the state and changing its structures (Goodwin 1997; Skocpol 1979; Tilly and Tarrow 2015). Goodwin states that instead of taking this notion for granted it should be consciously recognized that without states, there would be no revolution (Goodwin 1997, 14). As revolutions are directed towards the state, their success can be measured by the changes of state structure they achieve (15).

Hannah Arendt, another leading scholar of the structural approach, looks at state structures changing through revolutions and claims that a revolution is not possible where the state’s authority is uncontested: Revolutions need to disturb the state’s monopoly on violence. Yet, although the state’s loss of authority enables revolutions, it does not necessitate them (Arendt 1963, 115-116). Thus, merely looking at state structures explains only structurally how revolutions happen while other factors need be taken into account as well. Skocpol goes further and postulates that “social revolutions are rapid, basic transformations of a society’s state and class structures; and they are accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below” (Skocpol 1979, 4). This definition indicates the importance of the class aspect in Skocpol’s view on social revolutions as well as the successful transformation as a necessary condition. Despite the importance of revolting masses, however, Skocpol emphasizes that in her view, a social revolution cannot be understood by investigating the role of the movement’s leaders or of partaking individuals (17). Instead, the structural conditions of the international as well as the socio-economic context determine a revolution’s emergence as well as its trajectory while it cannot be assumed that these conditions are the same in every



country or context a revolution occurs (18f). She also emphasizes that national state authority is an actor and not just a frame in which contention takes place (25). Rather, the nation-state exists in-between and partly independently of social class division and the international state context (32). Skocpol's approach to the study of social revolutions is a comparative historical one, the explicit goal being to explain the causes of such events (36). In that, she differs widely from later theoretical frameworks, especially the relational one, where scholars focus on the interaction rather than causal chains between events (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001).

Another important structural factor besides the state in structural theories is the economy. Skocpol (1979) assumes that without economic crises, revolutions will not occur. As Wickham-Crowley (1997) in his account of alternatives to structural theories puts it, structural theories focus on the relations between different structural elements that trigger developments such as state-class relations. An economic crisis might also trigger weakened state power, suggesting that both factors work together and none alone is decisive to spark revolution.

A momentum of collapsing state structures needs to be used by the people; mobilizing the masses for change is thus a central question. Skocpol, who bases her arguments on Marxist theory, claims that class upheaval helps to carry out the revolution: Historically grown structural contradictions in society oppose classes against each other (Skocpol 1979, 7). Wickham-Crowley suggests that feelings of relative deprivation among the lower classes exacerbate the class struggle (Wickham-Crowley 1997). Goodwin agrees that the exclusion of mobilized groups can radicalize their demands. Other factors he sees as mobilizing are the state's responsibility for unpopular economics, state corruption and violence against mobilized groups as well as weak capacities in infrastructure and policing which allow revolutionary groups to grow undisturbed (Goodwin 1997, 17f). Mass mobilization enables the revolution to not only replace an unpopular ruler, but to reach actual change in society, which is one of the most important characteristics of revolutions (Skocpol 1979, 4).

A strength of structural approaches is their provision of a starting point against which contention will take place, usually the state. Furthermore, structuralists look at a wide range of factors beyond the state such as economy, class relations, world systemic factors, class/ethnic/gender/religious conflicts and societal organization as well as the relations between these elements (Wickham-Crowley 1997). Since it is questionable whether revolutions can be meaningfully compared anyways (Skocpol 1979), this approach allows

structural theories to look at a range of factors and combine them anew for each case studied. Yet, as reasons for revolutions seem to vary so broadly from case to case, looking at structural factors might not always suffice. Disregarding emotional factors, individual actions and specific trigger events might not adequately explain why people act the way they do in a specific moment. Further, structural factors do not explain the direction a revolution takes: If rebellion is against state power, why do some revolutions end up centralizing state authority even more, as happened in the French Revolution? Structural theorists aim at explaining how and why a revolution comes about. Skocpol seems to be the only scholar analyzing the outcomes of a revolution in her account of the Russian Revolution (Skocpol 1979, 206f). Further, structural theories ignore who brings revolution about and what they lead to. Cultural theories of revolutions focus on these issues (Wickham-Crowley 1997).

### *Cultural Theories*

Cultural approaches stress the role and agency of leaders and partakers in a movement while they are more tacit on what causes revolutions. They concentrate more on the factors of agency, actors and leadership. Eric Selbin claims that ideas and actors are the primary forces in revolutions because leaders who provide ideas give people something to rally around and steer the direction of a revolution (Selbin 1997, 123f). The importance of leaders conveying attractive ideas to revolt for is well connected to the concept of liminality as introduced by Bjørn Thomassen: The concept originally describes rituals of passage, e.g. turning from child into adult. The period of liminality marks the breaking of old structures without new ones being in place yet. In challenging existing political structures while new ones have not been installed, revolutions represent such a time of being in-between. The old structures are not legitimate anymore because the masses reject them, yet new structures have not been established yet. Importantly, in contrast to traditional rituals of passage, revolutions neither have a clear end nor a ceremony master to guide the process (Thomassen 2012, 688f).

Cultural theories concentrate on these moments of being in-between because they provide room for ideas to emerge and be carried by a disoriented mass; if leaders present convincing ideas, people are inclined to imitate them. As Thomassen states, revolutions happen if masses are led (Thomassen 2012, 692). For culturalists, class relations do not necessarily determine mass mobilization. Armbrust analyses the emergence of leaders in the Egyptian revolution, coming to the conclusion that the popular figure Taufiq 'Ukasha and al-Sisi both acted as so-called Tricksters (Armbrust 2013; 2017). Tricksters are individuals who are "at home in liminality" (Armbrust 2013, 836). They are themselves in-between structures

and often do not intent to solve the stage of liminality (Thomassen 2012, 696). Tricksters try to steer events in their favored direction and aim at mobilizing people for their causes. Sewell states that ideologies are constitutive of social order (Sewell 1985, 61). As Thomassen claims, revolutions are amongst others, a “rapid, basic transformation of society’s political structure” and mass mobilization happens against and outside existing structures (Thomassen 2012, 684). In that way, liminality is created, necessitating new ideas and ideologies, provided by outsiders of the previous system.

Clearly, cultural theories’ strength lies in their concern with leadership and mass mobilization as it can account for the individual conditions of a revolution. This also helps explaining the direction a revolution takes. The concept of liminality allows analyzing a central phase of a revolution that seems to decide whether it will be successful or not. This is exemplified by Saleh’s analysis of the situation in Syria after 2011: The Syrian revolution has reached a “state of nature” (Saleh 2017, 65). The old regime is no longer legitimate but no new order has been established, no resounding leader or Trickster took the stage; the country remains at war. A weakness of cultural theories is their disregard of how a revolution comes about (Wickham-Crowley 1997). Given the diversity of revolutions and who carried them out in the past, an explanation crediting only cultural elements of revolutionary society would seem odd. Their accounts seem to start only at the moment when a disruption of the system occurred and liminal phase and mass mobilization are on the brink.

### *Shortcomings of structural and cultural approaches*

Both structural and cultural theories of revolutions have weak points, but several of their characteristics complement each other respectively. While structural theories are better equipped at analyzing factors that lead to revolution, cultural theories depart from there. A joint analysis of how revolutions come about does not seem too far-fetched though: Although structuralists assume that ideology is not a cause of revolution but rather plays a role after the revolution has already started, Sewell claims that Skocpol weaves ideology into her approach to the class struggle (Sewell 1985, 58). Expanding the factor of ideology as an autonomous element leading to revolution would incorporate a cultural approach into her insights. As Selbin claims, bringing agency back in would also account for the individuality of events leading to revolution (Selbin 1997, 127). Structural theories are complemented by cultural theories’ focus on leadership and mass mobilization in better regarding revolutionary events while they are happening; there are, however, structural aspects to leadership which culturalists disregard so far, e.g. the spatial dimension to mass mobilization. Thomassen raises

the question of who will be in the common space where new leadership is selected and the answer might depend on structural factors: People who are more likely to easily access those physical places are urban rather than rural populations because revolutionary squares are often built in capitals and other cities such as Tahrir Square in the Egyptian Revolution (Thomassen 2012, 691).

As Thomassen points out there are two topics, which all strands of revolution theories cover insufficiently: The connection between revolutions and wars and how and why revolutions end (Thomassen 2017, 298). Skocpol (1979), in her account of the Russian Revolution, as well as Foran (2005), in his account of great social revolutions, are two of few who concentrate on the outcomes of revolution. Foran points out the difficulty for both strands of theory: All revolutions lead to different outcomes, depending on previous conditions, their leaders and in how far they are able to mobilize.

### *Relational Approach*

In an attempt to make all factors regarded in structural and cultural theories of revolutions useful to analysis, Doug McAdam, Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow developed a relational concept of analysis that does not concentrate on the categorization of phenomena such as social movements, revolutions, strikes, etc., but rather on the analysis of mechanisms and processes connecting challengers with their targets and the outcomes of that contentious interaction (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). They called their model of analysis dynamic contention and focused on three lenses of analysis: mobilization, actors and trajectories.

The model depicts the interaction between the challenger and the actor who is being challenged. It begins in a moment of broad change processes, which lead to the subjective perception of threat or opportunity for both challenger and challenged. Both the challenged actor and the challenger appropriate the threat or opportunity; the first in an organizational way, the latter in a social way because they are usually not in an institutionalized setting (yet). These approaches lead to innovative collective action by both actors, which again influence the other's collective action as well as their subjective perception of threat or opportunity. The last phase in the model is an escalation of the subjectively perceived uncertainty which is stressed by the other actors' actions (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 45).

For mobilization, which happens in different ways throughout the contentious action, the perception of threat or opportunity is momentous: Possible partakers of a movement will not follow a call they consider trivial or unrealistic. In the spirit of their mechanisms-focused approach, McAdam, Tilly and Tarrow investigate the mobilization process throughout the

entire phase of contention, as a campaign's mobilizing potential can vary throughout time. To investigate mobilizing potential, they recognize that the way an issue is framed in public debate is decisive for its perception. Framing, however, is not only done by the leaders of a campaign concerning a specific issue, but also by all partakers within the campaign as well as by actors outside of it, e.g. those challenged by the campaign. While such public perception of an issue as a whole is enacted by groups of people, it must also be borne in mind that individuals employ repertoires of contention as well (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 44). Whenever mobilization happens, all actors involved appropriate previous mobilizing structures as they adapt them to their local context. Especially for challenging actors who have previously not been organized, existing mobilizing structures provide an opportunity (43).

Another reason why old repertoires of contention are adapted during a campaign is their usage by newly formed identities (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 55). Political actors are actors who make collective claims and their identity is constituted by a collective name which can either be self-chosen or assigned to them (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 12). These identities are matters of dispute and develop in relation with the contentious politics by the actors (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 65). Additionally, actor formation is influenced by environmental mechanism (58), the attribution of opportunity and threat, social appropriation of existing organizations, framing (59) and the development of new innovative collective action (60). For the last factor, a less established actor displays a higher likelihood to develop innovative collective action, because they have limited possibilities to use established paths of public politics compared to more established actors (60).

In classical social movement research, a movement's trajectory has been described either as a movement career, referring to a typical development of continuous de-radicalization, or as a protest cycle. The latter one refers to the broader context of a movement and its development, whereas the first focuses on more punctual analysis (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 65) of these approaches, however, attends the dynamic and relational mechanisms that bring movements about because these mechanisms cannot be described as cycles or careers (67). Two such mechanisms can be identified in processes of contention: A mechanism of competition for power and a mechanism in trajectories of diffusion, repression and radicalization (68).

Based on this concept of dynamic contention, Tilly and Tarrow developed their model of contentious politics, first published in 2007, which concentrates on any point of intersection between politics, contention and collective action instead of the specific processes

of actors, mobilization and trajectories. This enables Tilly and Tarrow to analyze any part of contentious politics without having to use categories such as actors, mobilization and trajectory and furthers their aim of revealing the mechanisms of contention without categorizing the phenomena in a potentially restrictive way. The second edition of their book offers the theoretical foundation for this thesis as it is considered the state of the art in social movement analysis and will therefore later be discussed in detail.

Having discussed the roots and formative trajectories of social movement theories from structural and cultural theories, which initially focused mostly on revolutions, to the relational approach more open to other forms of contention, I now turn to a specific strand of social movement theories: Women's movement studies and feminist approaches to the study of contention provide a more nuanced background for my research of #MeToo as a form of feminist contention.

### **3.2 Feminist Social Movement Theories**

The relevance of women's movements for social change in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is evident (Buechler 2000; Ferree and Martin 1995b; Martin 1990; Springer 2005). However, this understanding was debated and feminist organization's status as a form of social movements has been questioned. This hampered research specifically focused on feminist and women's movements until the 1970s despite women's movements presence in a modern understanding of social movements since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (Martin 1990, 182, 186). Such assessments provoked the reproach of social movement theories as masculinist and oblivious of the implications of the gendered nature that most societies and states entail. An analysis of social movements should take these structural conditions into account and not consider them stable. A society's transformation by a social movement towards a more socially just society must inherently incorporate gender justice: Gender is one of the norms creating an ever-present social hierarchy and is, due to this presence, a hierarchy too easily taken for granted. To avoid reproducing such internalized hierarchies, gender norms cannot be ignored to pursue the goal of social justice (Buechler 2000; Ferree and Martin 1995b; Grisard and Biglia 2015). An analysis of social movements, which considers gender issues "will provide a dynamic, long-term and less state-centered approach to power, protest, and change" (Ferree and Mueller 2006, 55). The criticism of ignorance is also voiced concerning other identity axes such as race and class as intersecting hierarchies that should be reflected upon for a socially just society. Scholars who identify as Black and People of Color have specifically criticized the white Western coinage of feminist concepts of social movements and point towards the local

differences women experience in countries of the Global South (Basu 2010; Goodman 2007; Naidu 2016; Springer 2005).

An important contribution to the literature by Myra Marx Ferree and Patricia Yancey Martin, two sociologists from Germany and the US who have both published extensively on feminist organizations is the edited book *“Feminist Organizations. Harvest of the New Women's Movement”*. This work assembles an overview on different feminist organizations globally and engages with the debate on when to consider a movement to be feminist (Ferree and Martin 1995a). Even though the so-called Third-Wave Feminism has influenced feminist research since then, research on feminist organizations seems not to have changed fundamentally in its approach but rather in the choice of topics that more often include a critique of capitalism from a feminist perspective. Another aspect is a broader focus on more intersectional axes than only gender, but these developments do not challenge the insights gained in the 1990s. In the following, I engage with three salient aspects, feminism, organization and success, in feminist women's movements studies.

### *Feminism*

Scholars researching from a feminist standpoint explicitly engage with such social hierarchies and investigate women's movements and their transformative possibilities. One research topic concerns women's movements and their relation towards feminism. A basic definition of a women's movement refers to a movement, which addresses women as its constituency. A feminist movement sees women as an oppressed group in relation to men, with the explicit goal of challenging and changing the existing gender hierarchy and subordination of women seeming to be unchallenged in the literature on women's movements. Beyond that the diversity of women's movements globally and their different stances on feminism are acknowledged as well (Basu 2010; Ferree and Mueller 2006; Martin 1990).

Martin developed a list of ten criteria to determine whether an organization is feminist. Those criteria include feminist ideology, feminist values, feminist goals, feminist outcomes and the founding circumstances within a women's movement, any of which would qualify a movement to be feminist. A movement's structure, practice, membership, scope and scale as well as its external relations are criteria not specific to feminist organizations but are supposed to provide deeper insights into their nature and make women's movement more comparable to other movements (Martin 1990, 189). The criteria can thus be applied to all women's organizations. However, Martin acknowledges that different kinds of feminisms such as liberal, radical, socialist, lesbian and Marxist feminism are united in that each of their

ideologies sees “women as a "sex-class," acknowledges that women are oppressed and disadvantaged as a group, sees this as rooted in social arrangements, and articulates beliefs that its correction, or elimination, requires social, political, and economic change” (191).

Several other authors contribute to a more nuanced understanding of feminism in women’s movements: Feminist movements as a notion of discourse both emphasize the aspect of meaning-making for women’s movements as well as the flexibility of discourse, making feminist movements adaptable to differing conditions globally even though it exposes feminist movements to disunity and internal combats which possibly hamper feminist movements success (Katzenstein 1995; Mansbridge 1995). Others agree that even though women as a constituency for women’s movements, be they feminist or not, provide a clear target group for mobilization, but the broadness of this constituency makes sustaining mobilization hard (Buechler 2000; Ferree and Martin 1995b; Freeman 1995; Katzenstein 1995). Furthermore, the broadness of the constituency has not prevented that mobilization for women’s and feminist causes was most effective for white and middle class women, a paradox which Buechler attributes to white and affluent women’s privileges enabling them to concentrate on the one area where they are still oppressed while women discriminated on several axes of their identities cannot concentrate on one struggle (Buechler 2000, 138).

For the US context, Katzenstein notes a new form of mobilization since the 1990s she terms “unobtrusive mobilization within institutions” (Katzenstein 1990, 27). Employing the Catholic Church and the US military as examples, she shows how the general recognition of and identification with feminist issues leads to a new gender consciousness supporting the struggle for more social justice as well as narrower career-oriented gender concerns. The broad application also fits the patterns of mobilization identified by Ferree and Mueller around “discursive politics about values” vs. “the politics of rights and access” (Ferree and Mueller 2006, 48).

The form of mobilization also depends on the political opportunity structure in a given moment. Gelb argues that “economic crises and retrenchment, a more hostile political climate, organizational proliferation, and competition for scarce resources” (Gelb 1995, 128) provide opportunities for successful mobilization if there is a balance between the constituency and the goals of mobilization (Ferree and Mueller 2006, 46).



### *Organization*

Feminists often employ new forms of organization as part of the change they demand of common social organization. Organizations here refer to ways of organizing and not organizations as social systems. One organizational question that directly relates to mobilization is its form: Is it a mass movement primarily defined by the numbers of participants; a grassroots movement loaded with symbolism and lifestyle choices; or does it take an institutional approach? Surely, all forms have proven their potential for change (Ferree and Martin 1995a, 49).

Once mobilized, a movement is not a sure-fire success. Rather, organizational structures that provide enduring frames for mobilization are part of many social movement definitions and ensure a movement's continuation (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 11). Martin's criteria of feminist organizations mirror several of the debates held on different feminist movement organizational forms, such as the bureaucracy versus collectivism debate (Martin 1990). Whereas liberal feminist movements tend to be less critical of the bureaucratic and hierarchical order within their organizations, radical feminists tend to see hierarchical organizational structures as a copy of the male-dominated structure of mainstream society which they intend to change (Ferree and Martin 1995b). Although the collectivist approach that is often pursued instead of formal bureaucratic procedures fulfills feminists' aspiration to give everyone the opportunity to be involved, such structures can also hinder a movement's success because collective decision-making is often messier and more time-consuming (Ferree and Mueller 2006; Staggenborg 1995).

Another debate Martin's criteria touch on concerns the scope and scale of feminist organizations and whether they are directed towards external social change or whether their operations aim at influencing their members lives (Martin 1990). This also concerns the question whether they ally with other organizations which may not fully embrace their aims but with which they identify overlapping causes or whether they seek to remain fully autonomous in order not to compromise their cause (Basu 2010). While an advantage of alliance with other actors who do not agree on every detail is the enhanced power with which common claims can be made, the advantage of remaining autonomous guarantees that an organization's goals are in direct sight with every action it takes. Whether an organization is open towards collaboration with actors who might not fully embrace its aims also determines an organization's willingness to engage with institutions embedded in the societal structure they criticize which Martin refers to as "external relations" (191). Such engagement can lead to the institutionalization of an organization with the advantage of being able to bring its

causes directly to the table and penetrating a mainstream institution from within while the risk of having to compromise is even higher in official institutions than in alliances for similar causes, which is why some organizations might rather choose encapsulation and attempt to isolate themselves from official institution's influences (Freeman 1995).

### *Success*

While social movement theories in general have not excessively engaged in the discussion on movements' success, feminist scholarship has commented widely, if briefly, on the topic (McCammon et al. 2001). Scholars emphasize the importance of long-term over short-term success, especially concerning the future mobilization potential that a feminist movement creates even if it fails to reach its immediate goals (Gelb 1995; Springer 2005; Staggenborg 1995). Such mobilization potential implies an internal success for movements because they managed to influence their members and beyond in a sustainable way for their causes. The critique of social norms that feminists offer can lead to an adjustment of those social norms and thereby change the political opportunity structure for future feminist generations (McCammon et al. 2001).

Success can also be defined as concrete political or policy outcomes. To judge a movement's success in those, the level of analysis is of importance as most policy changes will occur on the national level rather than the international one. Basu argues that this way a judgment of success will also accommodate the different local context than create so many divisions among feminists globally (Basu 2010, 25). Nevertheless, Staggenborg argues for a consideration of the cultural outcomes of movements (Staggenborg 1995, 353). Ferree and Martin's claim that a "measure of the effectiveness of feminist organizations is the vehemence of the counter-movements they generated" (Ferree and Martin 1995b, 4).

Feminist women's studies employ a more specific approach towards feminist and women's contention. The specificities of this research concerning its definitions of feminism, its debate about organizational forms as well as success all point to an ideological debate, which are not present in other fields of social movement research because it does not constitute a debate of ideological principles but of the political ideology of feminism. Keeping this in mind, I now investigate the research on digital social movements, which is another sub-category of the literature on social movements.

### **3.3 Digital Social Movements and #MeToo**

#### *Feminist Digital Activism*

Ever since the early days of the Internet in the 1990s, which led to the development of digital and social media, its relevance as a space for activism has been debated (Drüeke 2015). The engagement with hashtag-campaigns and other means of online activism has grown into what can be termed a “communicative turn in movement repertoires” from offline to online spheres (Knappe and Lang 2014, 362). Most contributions to the academic debate come from feminist media studies, as indicated by the many publications in the journal of the same title and the lack of material from other disciplines. Even in the social movement studies, there is but one extensive work by Bennett and Segerberg who investigate the role of digital media for mobilization. Conclusively, they claim that the importance of online mobilization ranges somewhere in between claims of “Twitter Revolutions” assigning the highest potential to online activism, and “clicktivism” which describes the phenomenon of people gaining satisfaction from engaging in online debates with little actual effect (W. L. Bennett and Segerberg 2013).

The new mobilization platform means that women’s local and individual experiences can be linked “to larger narratives of inequality”, creating a discursive space, which demonstrates that sexual harassment and violence against women is not an exceptional phenomenon but normalized misogyny (Baer 2016, 17). Despite this opportunity, feminist scholars debate online activism’s significance and relevance. Some argue that Internet activism increases the possibilities for feminists to learn from each other and enhance the intersectionality of their feminism by its broad spreading potential and thereby making it more inclusive and less oppressive than the societal structures they criticize (Baer 2016; Rodino-Colocino 2014; Thelandersson 2014; Thrift 2014). In spite of the positive implications of this new way of protesting, more radical feminists criticize its intertwinement with neoliberalism through the Internet as a neoliberal tool. In their view, the Internet reproduces the oppressive and excluding mechanisms and structures present in offline interaction. It can even reverse feminists goals because neoliberalism is generally accompanied by enhanced individuality (Baer 2016), while many forms of feminism focus on collectivism, be it as an organizational form or by emphasizing the goal of improving women’s situation as a group, not as individuals (Basu 2010; Freeman 1995).

Nevertheless, digital media provides a new space to make claims. This space has been termed hashtag feminism, referring to feminist online activism where mostly individuals spread feminist messages without linking themselves to formal organizations as it had been

the case with former feminist activism (Clark 2016). Cyberfeminism, as the combination of gender and digital culture has also been termed, is as diverse as offline feminisms (Carter Olson 2016) and has even been called a “new wave of feminism, via hash tagging” (Dixon 2014, 34). Whether this new space makes claim-making easier and more accessible is, however, debated among feminist scholars. On the one hand, digital media’s growing reach and enabling of dialogue across national borders as well as language barriers, claim-making online enables people to engage in and side with a debate while not comprising on others of their views: It is no longer necessary to fully align with a movement, which usually includes positions on more than one issue; now debates can be joined without people having to agree on a movement’s set of positions (W. L. Bennett and Segerberg 2013, 1). On the other hand, this not only complements the individualizing effects of neoliberalism. It also overlooks barriers such as the disproportionate representation of members of higher social classes, especially on Twitter and digital literacy to engage in online media in the first place (Drüeke 2015; Latina and Docherty 2014). Literacy concerning the “right” feminist vocabulary can also be a limitation in decidedly feminist online movements, especially regarding the character limit of Twitter tweets (Latina and Docherty 2014). However, given the nature of digital conversation, feminists and other vulnerable groups will be confronted with hate speech and the like (Dixon 2014). Problems might also arise from within feminists groups because their global connection through the Internet does not automatically produce their cooperation, let alone unity: Problems known from offline feminist debates, especially concerning the intersectionality of gender identities with other axes of identity such as race and class, cannot be solved by the Internet’s reach (Carter Olson 2016; Clark 2016; Khoja-Moolji 2015).

Preceding #MeToo, several Twitter campaigns concerning women’s issues have made international headlines. The #YesAllWomen movement of 2014 is one of the most prominent hashtag-campaigns before #MeToo, creating 15 million responses worldwide during the first four days. This “feminist meme event” not only summarizes the experiences of women in a way that is accessible and collective, but becomes an event to be referenced as well (Thrift 2014). A problem pointed out with this kind of digital activism is the sensationalism and therefore destructiveness of Twitter as the medium for a feminist debate (Rodino-Colocino 2014; Thelandersson 2014). This is demonstrated by one of the reactions to #YesAllWomen: #YesAllWhiteWomen was Black and Women of Color’s critique of the initial hashtag as unrepresentative and focused on white women’s privileged experience not mirroring their

experiences (Baer 2016; Rodino-Colocino 2014). #BringBackOurGirls is another case in point: While the hashtag campaign raised media attention on the abduction of 276 Nigerian school girls by Boko Haram and even produced higher in-person engagement in the movement (Carter Olson 2016), the unreflective sharing of the hashtag by white people was criticized as epistemic violence against women of the Global South (Khoja-Moolji 2015).

Even though the online discourse connects women's struggles globally, it does not automatically imply global solidarity. Intersectional solidarity rather needs a safe space for debate and constructive reflection on privileges, especially by white women, which is why hashtags are an important contribution to the denormalization of sexual harassment and violence - but as a movement, online activism cannot be the endpoint (Khoja-Moolji 2015; Knappe and Lang 2014; Rodino-Colocino 2014; Thelandersson 2014).

Having considered previous forms of digital feminist activism and their implications, I now turn to the literature on #MeToo as the latest form of digital feminist activism available so far.

### *#MeToo*

The academic literature dealing with #MeToo is very limited due to the recentness of the phenomenon. Interestingly, there are numerous articles linking #MeToo with medical and health research, e.g. pointing out possibilities for better teaching conditions (Antman 2018), the professional implications of misogynist structures for women in medicine (Jagsi 2018) and the opportunities for improving public health infrastructure (O'Neil et al. 2018). All of these essays were published in the comment sections of journals and do not constitute extensive academic studies of #MeToo. Outside of medical academia, Airey points out the relevance of #MeToo for the denormalization of sexual harassment and violence against women, just as was done for #YesAllWomen. She also criticizes that feminist theories have not helped to make academia a more progressive space for this topic (Airey 2018). Manikonda et al. already indicate in the title of their study that Twitter is the important channel through which #MeToo started, but it is not the only channel. Especially the limit of 140 characters implies that extensive story-sharing and comforting beyond seeing the large amount of co-victims happen on other platforms such as Reddit (Manikonda et al. 2018). Gash and Harding, in an extensive study on #MeToo and its relevance for legal changes emphasize the gaps in US laws for victims of sexual harassment and violence. They conclude that #MeToo is an attempt at achieving a change of legal structures for better protection of victims as much as it is important as a space to speak out about sexual harassment (Gash and

Harding 2018).<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that the goal of changing the current legal structures can be considered a change of the existing social order, fulfilling some of the criteria the structural approach to social movements suggests for revolutions (Arendt 1963).

My thesis on #MeToo is a contribution to the literature in three ways. First, it helps tackling the scarcity of literature on the phenomenon so far. Second, it contributes to social movement literature from a feminist perspective not only because of the topic itself but also as a study employing contentious politics. Third, using this theory adds to the understanding of #MeToo while also nuancing the concept for the study of digital activism lacking so far. Generally, research on online activism seemingly fails to employ specific social movement theories in an explicit way so far. A theoretical investigation can provide new insights and be combined with and compared to other studies to reach more conclusive insights into the rather new phenomenon of online activism.

## **4. Methodology/Approach**

After having provided an overview on the relevant literature for #MeToo, I now detail my own approach towards this instance of contentious politics and clarify my epistemological standpoint, my methodology and the process of data collection, sampling and analysis for this thesis.

### **4.1 Feminist Standpoint and Research Ethic**

In my master thesis, I employ a feminist research ethic. As Ann Tickner states, feminists aim at “designing research that is useful to women (and also to men)” (Tickner 2005). Specifically, I rely on Ackerly and True’s definition of a feminist research ethic in four dimensions (Ackerly and True 2010): Firstly, the researcher has to be attentive to the power of epistemologies, i.e. the power of the knowledge they produce in their research (27). This knowledge will carry the researcher’s view on the subject of analysis. By providing this knowledge to others, their views will influence the general public (25). Being attentive to the power of epistemology implies that the researcher accepts that their beliefs are not universal and challenges them throughout the research process (25). Secondly, the researcher has to

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<sup>3</sup> I acknowledge that other national hashtags on sexual harassment and violence against women exist and contribute to the spreading discussion as well as global connection of issues (Drücke 2015). Due to the scope of the thesis, however, I concentrate on English-speaking and US-focused hashtag-campaigns as predecessors of #MeToo.

regard boundaries, which might limit their research. These can either be on the theoretical level, e.g. boundaries of the discipline within which the research is conducted. They can also refer to boundaries leading to exclusion or neglect of some views on the subject of analysis (31). Thirdly, the researcher needs to be attentive to relationships between anyone involved in their project. This includes the researcher's relationship with their subject as well as other part-takers in the research and the power structures playing out in these relationships (32). Lastly, the researcher needs to continually situate themselves during the research process. This includes being aware of their own privileges as well as boundaries to access. It also implies continuous reflection on the research results and how the researcher's personal positioning impacted the outcomes (36).

To live up to these four aspirations of thorough feminist research, I continually reflect on my research and question the choices I make during the process. While researching, I am aware that my supposition that #MeToo is feminist as well as my general goal of providing useful research for feminist causes positions my research in a certain way. For a feminist audience the power of the knowledge I produce lies in its practical applicability but also in thoroughly conducted research that relies on solid data: It is only useful for feminist causes if it regards #MeToo as completely as possible and should therefore refrain from either glossing over or reducing the usefulness of online contention. In particular with regards to the choice of the exemplary media used to illustrate my analysis of #MeToo, I describe the process of choosing those pieces as accurately as possible. Even though their purpose is an exemplary one, it is just that exemplification that can lead to an unknowing ignorance of other sides of the story of #MeToo.

Furthermore, my position as a white researcher constitutes boundaries: My perspective on #MeToo is through a privileged lens. Privilege can lead to ignorance of aspects that constitute an important part of the issue for women with other identity markers than my own. My possibilities to accommodate the perspectives of women with other experiences are limited, especially regarding that my material is mostly written from an outsider perspective. The aspect of boundaries is connected to that of relationships of those involved in this research: As I conduct my research at the desk I do not have personal contact with participants of #MeToo. Nevertheless, I engage with others' perspectives because #MeToo consists of many individual perspectives; my relationship to others is through my material. While researching, I remind myself to treat all perspectives with equal respect, especially those I disagree with. Constantly remembering the implications of epistemological power, boundaries and relationships in mind reflects my situatedness while conducting this project.

Feminist research ethic and feminist standpoint, which is focused on the epistemology of research, complement each other: Guided by the principles of a feminist research ethic I make arguments from a feminist standpoint in my thesis. I am aware that a feminist standpoint is contestable in the fields I relate my research to, namely political science and sociology. As Patricia Hill Collins points out, a standpoint is inherent to an epistemological choice and determines the external validation of the knowledge produced (Collins 2000). Feminist standpoint theory is therefore not universally applicable to all research and neither to all feminist research. My position as a white researcher provides me certain privilege and should therefore rather be called white or Eurocentric feminist standpoint. By describing my standpoint more specifically, I aim at avoiding another critique of feminist standpoint theory as epistemology: Feminist standpoints are also normed in some way and therefore run the risk of privileging one feminist standpoint over other equally justified standpoints. For example, to focus on individual experiences can also invite “the violence of essentialist, automatic privilege” if epistemic agency of women warrants the prioritization of the experiences of marginalized women (Naidu 2016).

#### **4.2 Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis**

The goal of my thesis is the application and testing of contentious politics for contention happening online as well as the implications of using online contention for feminist causes. While following the theoretical guidelines of Tilly and Tarrow closely, I rely on online articles by *The New York Times* to exemplify the concepts for #MeToo. To do justice to my feminist standpoint, I rely on Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) as the critical lens through which I engage with my material. A Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach suggests itself even though its background is in critical linguistics. CDA is “interested in analyzing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language” (Wodak and Meyer 2009). #MeToo’s demands do not focus on eliminating sexist language but they criticize a gendered power structure, which allows the discrimination of women on many levels. Keeping in mind those power structures and analyzing media materials consciously considering that they are written within gendered power structures helps to integrate the material into the analysis while reducing the risk of taking individual materials to be the single truth of the story of #MeToo.

A combination of the contentious politics approach with FCDA suggests itself because both the theoretical and the methodological approach enable a critical assessment of the



phenomenon itself and simultaneously focus on the performative possibilities it offers (Lazar 2005a; Tilly and Tarrow 2015). Especially the explicitly political nature of FCDA and its social emancipatory goals fit my intention to provide useful research on online activism for feminist causes. I rely on Michelle M. Lazar who is the leading scholar for feminist CDA and edited the only widely available book on FCDA in 2005. She claims that a feminist CDA specifically focuses on the understanding of power and ideologies and how they work to keep gender hierarchies in place through discourse. The goal of feminist CDA is to show how hegemonic and gendered assumptions are produced, but also challenged in discourse (Lazar 2007). By acknowledging gender as an ever-present structure of oppression, feminist CDA joins the emancipatory goals of both feminists and discourse analysis (144) and fits with CDA's general focus on analyzing injustices.

CDA scholars are rather blurry in their definition of discourse; it is claimed that discourses are “socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned” (Wodak and Meyer 2009), and “semiotic ways of construing aspects of the world” (Fairclough 2009). Instead of providing a strict definition, Lazar states what discourse in her view is not: She rejects the notion proclaimed by the poststructuralists Michel Foucault and Judith Butler that everything is discourse. In her view, CDA researchers tend to think that discourse is indeed a socially constitutive signifying practice. But discourse is only one element rather than the sole practice, augmented by material factors and practical experiences of identity and power. This definition fits the analysis of #MeToo: My analysis is restricted to online newspaper materials, disregarding material conditions and experiences. However, no matter the discourse in the media, women's daily experiences and their life conditions shape their views on sexual harassment and abuse, too. Thus, even if the discourse on #MeToo was condemning sexual harassment and abuse, changes in women's experiences and conditions eventually constitute success of #MeToo.

Lazar argues that focusing on the transformative possibilities of the individual as the newest wave of feminism often does (Schuster 2017) is not helpful to feminist perspectives. She acknowledges that performative performances such as drag, which question gender hierarchies, are successful on the individual level. However, in her view they are hardly representative of a wider destruction of those hierarchies and she doubts they will cause widespread change (Lazar 2005b). This implies that only a collective form of performativity reliably leads to social change. To search for a collective rather than an individualistic performativity in #MeToo seems sensible to me, since the sheer mass of involvement in the hashtag dialogue not only renders attending to all individual stories impossible but their

accumulation is the very reason why #MeToo became such a present phenomenon of contention.

Lazar identifies five key principles for feminist CDA: First, it should aim at social transformation and therefore needs to be oriented towards critically analyzing activist practice (Lazar 2007). Second, feminist CDA recognizes gender as an ideological structure, which maintains unequal social structures and develops a hierarchy between men and women (146). Third, it favors a comparative perspective as it recognizes the complexity of gender and power relations (148). Fourth, a focus on the discursive (de)construction of gender and connected social hierarchies takes a relational perspective towards gender. It is not about the analysis of single categories like “women” alone (150). Additionally, FCDA does not ascribe the production of gendered hierarchies purely to discourses, which would ignore experience as well as material conditions constituting those hierarchies on other levels. Fifth, critical reflexivity should guide feminist CDA, where reflexivity means the utilization of knowledge by individuals and their recognition that this knowledge shapes their own social practices (152). Lazar specifically reminds the reader that neo-liberal embracing of gender concepts can lead to their watering down and happens while leaving androcentric structures in place, thereby hindering actual destruction of gender oppression (153f).

With these five principles and the consideration of what discourse means, the methodological assumptions of my research are the representation of power through language, and discourse as an element of practicing this power structure. Assuming the effectiveness of collective actions for changing social power imbalances rather than individual ones, I focus on the collective development of #MeToo. The notion of discourse coined by Lazar and her aspirations for FCDA research are more central to my analysis than a detailed discourse analysis. Even though I rarely engage with the linguistic details of my material, to define discourse as a socially signifying practice justifies the engagement of material drawn from leading media. As only one part of discourse, those materials provide a partly yet significant insight because the discourse created in articles of *The New York Times* is particularly powerful coming from its position as a leading medium.

### **4.3 Data Collection, Sampling, Analysis**

As the goal of this thesis is to test the applicability of contentious politics as provided by Tilly and Tarrow rather than an empirical study of #MeToo, I follow their theory's concepts closely. My analysis is ordered by the concepts they provide in their application guide in Appendix A of their book, which is intended to provide easy access to their theory for

students (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 235f). Staying as closely as possible to their theory implies that I also engage with those concepts that are less relevant for the case of #MeToo to (in)validate the theory as completely as possible and to provide an integral overview on the relevance of contentious politics for online activism.

Even though each of the #MeToo stories should be heard and dealt with individually, I focus on a broader approach to #MeToo as a collective action. This is not only a pragmatic decision in light of the countless individual #MeToo statements, but also follows from considering that my engagement with those individual stories would not be purposeful as it would have to remain superficial and I am unable to offer any practical help to victims of sexual harassment and abuse. However, looking at #MeToo's consequences on the macro level cannot only provide an overview of its achievements but also show indicators of success for future movements. Accordingly, the analysis is primarily concerned with identifying mechanism of contention that lead to change in the discourse on sexual harassment and abuse; I thus trace the mechanisms suggested by Tilly and Tarrow (Tilly and Tarrow 2015) in online media on #MeToo. My exemplary choice of sources is directed by the theoretical approach of contentious politics and is not representative of #MeToo in its entirety.

To exemplify the contention and its discourse, I rely on online articles of *The New York Times* as one of the most popular newspapers in the USA and as the newspaper reporting on the Harvey Weinstein scandal on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017, that would lead to #MeToo within two weeks (Hausbichler 2018). My choice to not only rely on Twitter and other social media where #MeToo takes place is on the one hand a pragmatic decision due to the insufficiency of Twitter's search function, which does not allow to restrict by date or other criteria, and my unfamiliarity with other quantitative research tools. On the other hand, it is motivated by the reality of the media being a powerful creator of meaning in society. The *NYT* portrays the mainstream contents that public attention has been led to even though its audience covers a certain clientele, most significantly a rather liberal one. Tracing #MeToo via the reporting of a key medium will inherently obscure some aspects of #MeToo, yet it still constitutes a central element in creating discourse as mainstream media reporting shapes perception especially for audiences who do not engage directly with the topic of sexual harassment and abuse.

Especially since I employ the material exemplarily and it is thus not representative, I acknowledge several biases: My choice of examples is guided by my analysis along the lines of the theory. In CDA, data collection is not limited to one specific point in time during the research. Rather, data collection is a process that continues during the analysis as the

refinement of concepts and categories researched can lead to new results (Wodak and Meyer 2009, 27). Therefore, I researched the development of #MeToo as well as the exemplary material while applying contentious politics to #MeToo. One limitation of this way of research is thus its lack of system. Additionally, it is not only my bias from a feminist standpoint theory that influences the choice of examples, but the exemplary articles themselves are likely to contain biases by their authors.

For the purpose of identifying exemplary newspaper articles to demonstrate #MeToo's contentious aspects, I rely on the online search function of *The New York Times*. This search functions has three options to restrict search results; by date range, by section and by type. Further, the search function offers to sort results by relevance, by newest or by oldest.<sup>4</sup> I sorted all my results by relevance, restricted to articles only, disregarding content in other forms but text and searched in all sections. A systematic search for content by the search word '#MeToo' for each month from October 2017 to July 2019 constitutes the backbone of my analysis. This time period contained 3486 articles related to #MeToo; a mean of 166 articles per month. Looking at one-month periods allowed me to identify the main topics in those timeframes while still keeping the richness in detail feasible for my project. I also gained an overview on #MeToo's trajectory in numbers of content, e.g. I discovered that by far the most articles on #MeToo were published in April 2018, a surprising number of 962. Given the mean of 166 articles per month, I identified the salient topics of the time by titles and lead paragraphs, as these are usually indicative of the article's positioning, of the first eight articles a month sorted by relevance. I only excluded briefings that contain weekly summaries as well as year reviews, thus moving to the next articles in line until the eighth, but I did count the Year in Gender year review of December 2017. Appendix A provides an overview of the results month by month.

These roughly 5 % of #MeToo articles provide a first overview of #MeToo's development. Before I began to systematically read through the material, I prepared a list of categories inspired by the concepts of Tilly and Tarrow. Knowing what they would look for in contention, I started with actors, trajectory, (anti)feminist twists, offline events and changes as the initial categories. During my first reading of an article, I decided on which category it belonged to and took basic notes on its content. During the process, I added other categories as I realized that the ones I began with were not detailed enough: I added professional fields,

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<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, *The New York Times* offers no explanation on how the relevance of articles is determined. Yet, whatever the criteria, the newspaper's status as a main medium makes the investigation of what such a medium posts as most relevant worthwhile.

culture, politics, international coverage and toxic masculinity. As CDA scholars suggest, this is part of the research process that never ends (Wodak and Meyer 2009). With the help of the extended category list, I was able to gain an overview over #MeToo and to go back to individual articles while applying the concepts.

In general, the theory of contentious politics provides many subcategories; especially concerning mechanisms, which already is a subcategory of the explanatory concepts. It is rather difficult to keep an overview of the contention the theory is applied to, also given that Tilly and Tarrow apply these concepts to their examples in an inconsistent order. Considering that the authors claim to provide an easy guide for students of contention (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 13), the appendix in which they propose an accessible step-by-step approach is more helpful than the book chapters in which they elaborate on the concepts in a less comprehensible way and order.

For each concept of contentious politics listed in the guide, I looked for the relevant aspects in #MeToo and engaged with the corresponding articles more deeply to identify mechanisms and subsequent changes in actors and on the political and social level. Starting from the initial cluster I created with the help of my categories, I extended my basic notes on the relevant articles. I was specifically attentive towards ways that the sources critique or manifest current gendered power structures that enable and sanction sexual harassment as critiqued by #MeToo. With the intention of identifying useful strategies for online feminism, I rely on a variety of authors with different backgrounds as well as several exemplary articles per concept of contentious politics. After a first engagement with the concept and relating relevant articles, I sometimes engaged with further articles beyond my initial list, e.g. in-text references that linked relevant articles.

Even though Tilly and Tarrow stress that their definition of “politics” is not a narrow one by choice, they provide few examples of contention that would not fall into a narrower definition of politics. #MeToo is, beyond its immediate effect of raising awareness for the magnitude of women’s experience with sexual harassment and abuse, a difficult example for some of the concepts because its implicit political consequence that gendered social hierarchies need to be abandoned is such an abstract one. This impacts the analysis of actors and identities as well as the institutions because not all of them seem to be dealing clearly with the same consequence (otherwise, male-oriented politics would be far more outraged at the prospect of its termination).

## 5. The Concept of Contentious Politics

Before applying contentious politics to #MeToo, I provide a short overview of the most important aspects of the theory. Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow first published on the concepts of contentious politics together with Doug McAdam in 2001 (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). The book was criticized even though its contribution as a grand theory was recognized. While providing numerous insights and connections between different forms of contention by focusing on mechanisms and processes similar in them, the book lacked analytical clarity. Tilly and Tarrow's monograph "Contentious Politics" published in 2007 deepened the concepts developed previously and provided more empirical support (Hanagan 2008; Klandermans 2008). The second edition was re-worked by Tarrow after Tilly's death to include the latest developments of social movements around the world as well as in the Internet and published in 2015 (Tilly and Tarrow 2015). As "Contentious Politics" is the latest version of the theory updated to current developments, I rely on this work.

The theory of contentious politics focuses on identifying dynamic mechanisms that connect all factors leading to contention rather than looking for causalities in those factors themselves (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 43). It is thus a relational approach: "To explain contentious politics is to identify its recurrent causal mechanisms, the ways they combine, in what sequences they recur, and why different combinations and sequences, starting from different initial conditions, produce varying effects on the large scale." (13). The authors claim that their theory is an evolution to previous approaches of the classical social movement agenda because they focus on the dynamic mechanisms relating social change, political opportunities, mobilizing structures, frames and transgressive forms of action to each other (43). Instead of focusing on classifying such efforts as social movements, contentious politics includes a range of phenomena that do not necessarily qualify as social movements; social movements are a specific form of contentious politics that is sustained by employing repetitive means and basing their work on permanent organizations or networks (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 11). Contentious politics not only defines the theoretical approach but it also incentivizes a methodological approach of going from concept to concept and then reassembling the trajectory of the contentious phenomenon.

Tilly and Tarrow define contentious politics as "interactions in which actors make claims bearing on other actors' interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators of claims or third parties". Contentious politics consists of three components: First, contention implies that

someone is making claims that bear on someone else's interests; second, those claims are coordinated on behalf of shared interests and the basis to form collective action; and third, collective claim-making is considered politics as the claim-makers deal with agents of government in direct or indirect ways (Tilly and Tarrow 2015). The authors emphasize that the government's involvement as target or initiator to claims is not a necessary element of contentious politics (9).

In order to analyze contentious politics, Tilly and Tarrow suggest a dynamic mechanism- and process-focused approach. By mechanism, they mean a "delimited class of changes that alter relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations", where processes are "regular combinations and sequences of mechanisms that produce similar (generally more complex and contingent) transformations of those elements". The authors suggest that complicated social phenomena can best be analyzed in three steps: A thick description followed by a decomposition of the phenomenon into basic causes concluded by the re-composition of those causes to provide an overview of how the phenomenon developed (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 28).

For the first step of description of the contention, collective action and politics that constitute contentious politics, Tilly and Tarrow identify four central concepts: Political actors, political identities, contentious performances and contentious repertoires. The makers of claims, more often than not, are hardly part of governments but become political actors by making collective claims (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 12). By making claims on behalf of a group, new political identities constitute themselves that can be expressed via self-chosen or given collective names (12). Contentious performances are "familiar and standardized ways in which one set of political actors makes collective claims on some other set of political actors" (14). If those performances become an established set of tools for a certain group of political actors, they are considered to be contentious repertoires (14). These repertoires are not static, however, but subject to change either as an effect of rapid political changes or because of changing incremental structural factors that open up new possibilities for contentious action (19). The latter is a less immediate change but considered to be more crucial in the long run (20). The Internet can be considered to be such a changing factor as its availability on a global scale increases incrementally and opens up new possibilities for the mobilization and coordination of contentious politics. So far, the Internet's role has developed threefold: as a mobilization tool for locally specific events; a coordination tool to coordinate contention for the same causes in different locations around the world; and as a tool of action itself because

it enabled an increasing amount of “connective action” where online activism is not just a means towards offline activism but a form of contention itself (16).

To move from the descriptive to the analytical stage, Tilly and Tarrow offer a range of additional explanatory concepts. These include sites, conditions, streams of contention, episodes, outcomes, mechanisms and processes (Tilly and Tarrow 2015). The authors employ a number of other concepts but this selection serves as an introduction to the theory.

The description of the sites of contention offers the starting point for analyzing any contention: the site can be “originators, objects, and/or arenas of collective claims” and can vary for different kinds of contention. They can be individuals as well as elements of social life, like a profession or an organization (235).

Conditions of contention vary for different actors in specific regimes. They depend on an actor’s ties to the government and the political climate towards the claims the actor is making as well as an actor’s relations to other relevant actors. Those conditions shape the way contention starts and can change during contention (239).

Streams of contention are sets of events singled out by researchers for explanation that contain connected moments of contention. They are thus not fixed elements of contention but depend on researchers’ decisions, for example on the selection of sites of contention to be analyzed (239).

Contentious politics achieves changes in the conditions that the claim-makers faced initially and produces outcomes that are traceable to contentious action. Outcomes are the main explanatory target of analyzing contentious politics and researchers look for the mechanisms and processes that produce these outcomes (239f).

To explain the conditions in which contention occurs, we look at regimes. Those are the relations between the actors in contentious politics, the challengers as well as those being challenged. Governments are usually one of the actors involved in regimes because they control decisive amounts of means of coercion. Their relation with the government defines other actors, either as members or challengers, or sometimes as outsiders who operate outside the direct control of the government (240).

The characteristics of a regime produce a political opportunity structure. It is determined by six regime properties: the multiplicity of independent centers of power within the regime; openness to new actors of the government; instability of current political alignments; whether influential allies or supporters are willing to support challengers; the



degree of repression or facilitation the challengers face by the regime; as well as decisive changes in any of these properties (240).

All the above concepts are properties of contention that can explain parts of contention. To employ them for an analysis of contention, it is necessary to identify the mechanisms and processes that connect these different properties. Mechanisms are “changes that produce the same immediate effects over a wide range of circumstances” (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 240). While mechanisms in contention come in a great variety, the following three are the most common according to the authors: brokerage, meaning the “production of new connection between previously unconnected sites”; diffusion, the “spread of a form of contention, an issue, or a way of framing it from one site to another”, and coordinated action, where “two or more actors’ engagement in mutual signaling and parallel making of claims on the same object” can be found (31). While these mechanisms directly concern the spread of claim making from one site to another, other mechanisms help explain why such a spread might be halted or facilitated by other circumstances: social appropriation, boundary activation, certification, identity shift, competition, escalation and radicalization as well as repression and social control (36-37).

Several mechanisms that regularly combine in various ways and produce changes on a larger scale than single mechanisms constitute processes (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 29). Examples for processes are mobilization (actors starting to make contentious claims) and demobilization (actors ceasing to make claims) (38); counter-mobilization; new coordination, which is the combination of diffusion and brokerage mechanisms to coordinated action; and upward scale shift, implying the coordination at a higher organization level (35).

Episodes are “bounded sequences of continuous interaction” of contentious politics, which researchers can divide up for their analysis to discover mechanisms and processes more easily. By breaking streams of contention into episodes, the researcher is able to describe them in detail and identify the causes of those episodes, and reassemble those causes to explain the episode. Tilly and Tarrow call this the “mechanism-process approach” (J. Bennett 2017).

## **6. #MeToo as Contentious Politics in the US**

Equipped with these descriptive and explanatory concepts, I analyze #MeToo with the intention to check the applicability of the individual concepts as well as the theory at large to online contention in the following.

### **6.1 Bases**

The following part describes the components of #MeToo and what is special about it in detail and enables the identification of mechanisms and processes marking #MeToo's development.

#### **6.1.1 Contention, Collective Action and Politics**

For the analysis of #MeToo with the concepts of contentious politics, it is necessary to first demonstrate why #MeToo is an instance of contentious politics. According to Tilly and Tarrow, contentious politics is claim-making bearing on third parties' interest and involving a government in some way. It is the intersection of contention, politics and collective action (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 7f). The aspect of contention in #MeToo is the combination of the hashtag of demonstrating the commonplace of experiencing sexual harassment and abuse for women, and the demand involved is centered first and foremost around recognition for the magnitude of the problem, and secondly to sanction such behavior (Gash and Harding 2018). The coverage in *The New York Times* focused on the first aspect of showing the magnitude of the problem in the early days of #MeToo in October 2017 (Codrea-Rado 2017; Rutenberg, Abrams, and Ryzik 2017). Yet, already on November 5, Jessica Bennett names the intention of #MeToo more clearly: women demand that men could no longer get away with sexual harassment and assault so easily (J. Bennett 2017).

#MeToo involves contention because the participants of #MeToo make claims that bear on others' interests: They demand that sexual harassment and abuse are recognized as a structural problem women face and offences should be taken seriously, or as Hirshman terms it, women are claiming the moral high ground by uncompromisingly terming harassment and abuse as wrong (Hirshman 2019). Those demands bear on the interest of offenders as well as on everyone benefiting from the patriarchal dividend derived from the systematic oppression of women. As Brooks Barnes claims on November 9, 2018, people in the top jobs of the film industry, from where #MeToo emerged, resent the changes #MeToo brought about, such as efforts to diversify the membership of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences or the Oscar nominees because it threatens their own powerful positions (Barnes 2018). Michelle

Goldberg writes about the “shame of the MeToo men”, who she diagnoses not to have learned enough from #MeToo as some seemingly resist to understand the difference between their own public shame after being accused as a predator and their accusers’ trauma (Goldberg 2018). Where there is no common understanding, the claims made by #MeToo bear on those men’s interests even harder. It is, however, not only the most powerful men whose interests are at stake: sexual harassment and abuse are sanctioned by a gendered social hierarchy which all men benefit from, and the abolition of one warrants change of the other, resulting in the diminishment of the patriarchal dividend (Connell 2015, 133).

Even though Tilly and Tarrow emphasize that it is not necessary for a government to be the target of the challengers’ demands, they point out why it makes a difference whether governments are involved in contention: Governmental power creates a power hierarchy between those involved in government and those kept from power; governments make the rules for and control the coercive means which determine how contentious claims can be made (Tilly and Tarrow 2015). For #MeToo, their claim that governments do not necessarily have to be direct receivers of contentious claims while still being involved holds: The demands of #MeToo involve the government because sexual harassment and abuse are sanctioned by misogynist social structures that are produced and reproduced by governments: The social setting #MeToo reacts to and critiques is a patriarchal one and the government is part of it. Therefore, the demands of #MeToo, even if not addressing the government directly, “bear on governmental rights, regulations and interests” (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 8). Furthermore, as those in political power are mostly men, who as a group are #MeToo’s main addressees, it not only challenges governmental properties on an abstract level but poses a risk for individuals in power (8). Bennett’s argument from November 5, 2017, that women demand that harassers cannot get away with predatory behavior anymore relates directly to the government: She claims that women make that demand because they cannot act directly against the alleged predator who became US president despite the known accusations of sexual harassment and abuse against him (J. Bennett 2017).

The hashtag as a shared term for social media content is used specifically by women to collect their experiences in one virtual space and is thus a coordinated and collective action on behalf of their shared interest to show the magnitude of the problem, demonstrate that it is a structural problem and demand change in society’s dealing with it. According to Tilly and Tarrow, such collective claim-making can fall into three categories: identity claims, which “declare that an actor exists”; standing claims, demonstrating that an “actor belongs to an

established category within the regime and therefore deserves the rights and respect that members of that category receive”; and program claims, which are “[calls] for their objects to act in a certain way” (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 110). #MeToo raises the awareness for women as a social group that makes common claims, their standing as member of society who deserve the same respect given to men, and involves a call to change predatory behavior as well as social conduct around it. I now turn to the actors involved in #MeToo.

### **6.1.2 Actors and Identities**

Actors in #MeToo are rather difficult to single out. Even though individuals are sometimes attributed to be leaders of #MeToo, as Maya Salam claims of Asia Argento in August 2018 (Salam 2018), it is the mass of participants in sharing the hashtag fueling the contention more than individual leaders. Two actors, however, can be identified easily: While the common denominators of the mass of participants in #MeToo may be few beyond the fact that they experienced sexual harassment and abuse, the initiators probably pose the most juxtaposed life situations. On the one hand, there is the social organizer Tarana Burke, a Black woman who initiated the NGO MeToo in 2006 as a movement to help victims of sexual harassment and abuse. On the other hand, there is Hollywood actress Alyssa Milano whose call for the use of #MeToo on Twitter made the hashtag go viral. In an *NYT* article on October 20, 2017, Garcia reported how the two initiators, whose social reality could hardly be more different, joined forces in the combat against sexual harassment: Initially, Black women and Women of Color criticized Milano for using #MeToo without crediting Burke as the initiator, but Milano then reached out to collaborate with Burke (Garcia 2017). When the *Time* announced that the “Silence Breakers” of #MeToo would be its “Person of the Year 2017”, Burke and Milano gave a joint interview in December 2017, underlining their intention of joining forces for the fight against sexual harassment (Bromwich 2017).

However, the grievances between white and Black women and Women of Color in online activism had been demonstrated once again just two days before #MeToo went viral: on October 13, 2017, many women joined the #WomenBoycottTwitter when Rose McGowan was logged out of her Twitter account after accusing Harvey Weinstein of sexual harassment. At the same time, Black women and Women of Color users of Twitter pointed out that non-white victims of harassment and abuse are not supported by such symbols of solidarity like a Twitter boycott (Garcia 2017). By citing Tweets stressing the lack of intersectionality in feminist movements as well as directly quoting Tarana Burke and April Reign, initiator of #OscarSoWhite, and not quoting Milano except for her Tweets, Garcia gives Black women

and Women of Color's concerns and demands space and draws the attention on the issue of intersectionality in the initiation of #MeToo.

A year after #MeToo went viral, Burke talked about her plans for MeToo with Aisha Harris of *NYT*. Burke pointed towards two issues that hampered #MeToo's and her own movements progress: The focus was too much on sexual harassment and abuse as a traumatic experience instead of how women heal from it and Black women and Women of Color were still not represented and respected in the discourse. To make use of the broad attention the issue of sexual harassment and abuse still receives and to focus on the healing aspect, Burke wants to work with Hollywood writers' rooms to deal with abuse on screen as well as create resources for women on their healing journey (A. Harris 2018). While Burke's activism before MeToo became a hashtag was not honored or supported on a wide basis, the attention the hashtag provides is beneficial for her NGO MeToo and her access to industries like the Hollywood writing rooms is also enabled through the spread of the hashtag. Even though Burke as its initiator is still not on the front lines of #MeToo, the new awareness sustains her activism, just as her organizational resources enable her to make use of the new opportunities. While she might not be a visible leading figure, she is one of very few constantly present actors in this contention.

The common actors in #MeToo, who participate by making their experiences of sexual harassment and abuse public, are mostly women, although men make similar experiences, too, if in smaller numbers. Participating in #MeToo has three requirements: access to a web-enabled device, having experienced sexual harassment and abuse in any form, and having the will and courage to publicly talk about it. A feminist consciousness is not required; the identities of actors who participate in #MeToo is constituted by their experience of sexual harassment and abuse, and to some extent by their gender as ascribed by social norms because sexual harassment and abuse against women is sanctioned by the patriarchal structures suppressing women. It also legitimizes oppressive behavior against all those who do not meet the criteria of hegemonic masculinity, making other genders than female a target for sexual harassment and abuse, too (Connell 2015). The identity of the #MeToo participants becomes political in that they collectively rally around the demand to end sexual harassment and abuse. This rallying, however, was dependent on prominent Hollywood actresses speaking out because their accusations and the public resonance they created were more powerful than accusations voiced by unknown women as Rutenberg et al. state in October 2017, one day after the hashtag went viral (Rutenberg, Abrams, and Ryzik 2017).

Regardless of the background of feminist topics informing the resentment of sexual harassment and abuse, participants of #MeToo do not have to identify as feminist. This hampers the development of #MeToo to a movement based on a common identity. A common identity would separate the challengers from those who they make claims on, relate them to each other, specify the relations towards those outside the common identity more clearly and create a shared understanding for those within the boundaries of the movement (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 107). Despite the lack of such common denominators, the participants' actions are still feminist, as they are speaking up about gender-related oppression and question the bigger system, which sanctions such behavior. By uniting under a hashtag describing their common experiences, women created a common claim under a feminist banner, even though not every individual participant identifies with feminism.

Interesting about this political identity is that it potentially mobilizes more than half of humanity because its constituency are women: Assuming that all women are oppressed by patriarchal structures in some way, all are concerned with sexual harassment and abuse, even though not all women are equally oppressed (Collins 2000; Connell 2015). If we add those men who are marginalized because of their femininity, we may wonder why #MeToo did not mobilize even more participants. It does, however, explain the outrage of the some, especially men, against #MeToo because the high mobilization potential threatens the patriarchal power structures that assigns privilege to those benefitting from hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2015).

The identity of those who question the legitimacy of #MeToo is constituted by their interest in keeping the status quo, what Hirshman calls “the normal forces of opposition to social change – traditional religion, conservative politics” (Hirshman 2019, 117), and sometimes by their ignorance of gendered power structures or their misguided interpretation of what #MeToo is about, like the prohibition of flirting and the like. Misunderstandings are, however, sometimes fostered by #MeToo participants themselves, as Bret Stephens claims in an *NYT* article on December 20, 2017: Outspoken feminists' rejection of a distinction between assaulting behavior by severity is not helpful for appealing to society's sense of justice (Stephens 2017). A case in point is a letter by French actress Catherine Deneuve and more than 100 other actresses claiming that they find #MeToo to be exaggerating because it condemns assaulting behavior no matter how severe (Codrea-Rado 2018). Especially in the entertainment industry, men are concerned with the supposedly unfair treatment #MeToo subjects them to. Lindy West, in an outraged opinion piece from October 17, 2017, takes on film director Woody

Allen's cautions against #MeToo becoming a witch hunt: Hunt proclaims that "Yes, this is a witch hunt. I'm a witch and I'm hunting you." Thereby she does not only rephrase the historic reference to witch hunts, during which women were prosecuted, to the ironic statement that she as a witch is now hunting men. She also expresses her pity for men like Woody Allen who weirdly condoles Weinstein (West 2017). Warnings against taking measures too far in fighting sexual harassment and abuse seem rather ironic given the exacerbated magnitude with which inappropriate behavior occurs, even though these warnings might be justified in referring to wider society's feeling of justice and concrete legal measures as Stephens points out on December 20, 2017 (Stephens 2017).

In general, one of the pitfalls of hashtags as a shared term anyone can use is its accessibility to people with different goals than those of the initiators: Trolls who "criticize, lambast, or otherwise serve as contrarians who disrupt or inflame threads in online discourse" can easily join the action (Rodino-Colocino 2014). People who disagree can thus join the debate not only by commenting on sympathizing participants' posts but by using the hashtag even with counter-imposed content and their posts become part of the online collection, too. As much as it is part of #MeToo, it is not covered by my materials from *NYT*. However, I engage with the counter-mobilization in the excursus on the *Gillette* advertisement.

### **6.1.3 Social Movement Base**

Social movement bases are often confused with social movements according to Tilly and Tarrow. The authors separate the two and claim that social movement bases are "the social background, organizational resources, and cultural frameworks of contention and collective action" (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 11). Social movement bases thus develop over time. A recent publication by law scholar Linda Hirshman, even though a popular scientific book, provides a solid overview from a feminist perspective from the first lawsuits on grounds of sexual harassment in the work place in the 1970s until today's #MeToo (Hirshman 2019). Even though Jennifer Szalai criticizes Hirshman in her review for *NYT* for her uncompromising attitude towards liberal feminists the book provides the narratives developing feminist claims in #MeToo, even if in a biased way (Szalai 2019).

For Hirshman, the salience of sexual harassment as a social issue begins with the mysterious drowning of a previous presidential campaigner of Robert Kennedy in the presence of Senator Ted Kennedy in 1969. Even though under the mask of conservative family values, the author claims that afterwards, the media started to investigate into the

sexual misconducts of powerful men (Hirshman 2019, 4). When feminist scholars began to deal with the issue in the mid-1970s, men's power abuse in the work place was termed to be sexual harassment. By giving it a name, women could now talk about and fight the problem specifically (6). For Hirshman, the “#MeToo movement has the connection between sex and male aggression been fully made to the public” (30).

Sexual harassment, however, became a significant point of reference for women only when it was legally recognized as a violation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. A dedicated law student, Catharine MacKinnon, started this process in 1975, re-arguing the prevalent feminist notion of equality in law present until then. As Hirshman puts it, “[the] point is not sameness or difference, but domination and subordination” (Hirshman 2019, 13). This new way of arguing made it possible not to ask whether women were treated equal to men but whether certain actions oppressed women. The issue of oppression in the workplace had implications for other areas, too, as feminists began to question the separation of the public and the private sphere even though both were organized following patriarchal principals and the oppression of women in one sphere reflected that in the other (17). Law scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw developed the concept of intersectionality around the same time in the 1970s as a reaction to the rejection of sexual harassment complaints of Black women by courts (18). Going the way through the courts and challenging the current legal situation via lawsuits meant that the actors of the time used “the most institutionalized form of contention that Americans possess” (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 50).

Hirshman constantly reminds her readers that #MeToo still deals with the same topics as feminists in the 1970s have, and that Black women have played a primary role in this struggle, repeating itself in Tarana Burke's initiation of MeToo in 2006, long before a white feminist made it go viral. Hirshman gives credit to Black women's actions on the road to #MeToo and the context it takes place in today in general, which Szalai, generally rather critical of the book despite its useful overview, emphasizes as well (Szalai 2019). Hirshman describes the struggle of Black women to ally with other groups in the fight against sexual harassment and abuse as even more exacerbated than that of white women because Black women face a “conflict of loyalties between their membership of a racially oppressed group and their right not to be harassed”, worsened by the stereotype of Black men being viewed as natural sex perpetrators (Hirshman 2019, 52f).

Hirshman describes women's fight to have sexual harassment and abuse fully legally recognized. It involved the recognition of creating a hostile environment at the workplace as a criteria which provides “a clear picture of the conditions of power” necessary to understand



harassment situations (Hirshman 2019, 45) in the 1980s. Shortly after, the ruling that a woman's "voluntary" participation in the acts she is suing is not the ground to judge whether it was harassment or not, but rather whether she welcomed the advances, was another positive development for women (49). Despite these advances, Hirshman stresses that #MeToo is still fighting the same fight.

An episode from that fight Hirshman pays particular attention to is one that repeated itself: accusations brought forward against a US Supreme Court nominee, who gets confirmed nonetheless. The first time, it was Anita Hill, a law professor, accusing Clarence Thomas, nominee for the US Supreme Court in 1991, whom Hill had worked for as his assistant when Thomas was chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in the 1980s, of sexual harassment (Hirshman 2019, 61f). Even though Hill's appearance in the hearing was authentic and she was publicly believed, Thomas, who was questioned second and performed an emotional instance of male rage was appointed after the hearings (83f). The Hill-Thomas hearings were a terrifying example for women of what happens if they speak out about their experiences. Even though a book published by two journalists about the case later established rather unequivocally that Hill was telling the truth, the Republicans managed to push through their nominee, also because the left, usually the natural ally of feminists, was paralyzed because opposing Thomas meant opposing a Black nominee. Another spice that adds to the political insanity was that Democrat Joe Biden, today presidential candidate for the 2020 elections, was the chairman of the Judiciary Committee who made the hearing a hard time for Hill by not allowing all her evidence to be used (79).

The second time, the nomination and then confirmation of Bret Kavanaugh, another Republican US Supreme Court judge nominee, replicated the Hill-Clarence hearings in 2018. Christine Blasey Ford, a professor of law like Hill, accused Kavanaugh of sexually assaulting her in the 1980s, and again, Kavanaugh was confirmed nevertheless (Hirshman 2019, 234f). Maureen Dowd, in an article for *NYT* published September 22, 2018, states that Ford was even worse off than Hill because she also had the Internet's possibilities working against her as well as a misogynist president discrediting her instead of "only" the White House. As Dowd puts it, feminists "haven't forgotten [their] history. But [they] still seem doomed to repeat it." (Dowd 2018b).

The Democrats' ambiguous history of dealing with sexual harassment and abuse continued with Bill Clinton, US president from 1993 to 2001 and a self-identified feminist, who was the

“most reliably supportive president feminists have ever had” while privately acting rather transgressive towards women (Hirshman 2019, 112). Nevertheless, feminists, most notably Gloria Steinem, supported Clinton publicly (105f) and as Dowd puts it in an article from June 9, 2018: feminists approved of him as long as he advanced women’s issues, even though he pushed them back privately (Dowd 2018a). While Steinem at the time denied the power imbalance between the US president and Monica Lewinsky, his intern who he had an affair with, Hirshman is convinced that the power imbalance was present because Clinton knew what public reaction Lewinsky would face if their affair was uncovered while she seemingly did not (Hirshman 2019, 108). Feminists continuing to support Clinton was another instance of trying to “accommodate both political gender equality and sexual libertinism in one culture” (97), an endeavor feminism was trying to undertake after the pornography debate of the 1970s brought a win for those approving of pornography as an emancipatory tool for women and opposing its regulation by the state (39).

For Hirshman, the real enemies of feminists, or “frenemies”, are the liberals, especially those in the media (Hirshman 2019, 118) who have depicted feminists as enemies since the 1980s (40). But also outside the media, liberals have not always been good feminist allies; not only did many Democrats push for Barack Obama as presidential candidate instead of Hillary Clinton as the first female candidate because her husband’s scandals and her support for him had stained her (130ff); #MeToo revealed some skeptics in the Democratic party, e.g. in dealing with Senator Al Franken when he was accused of sexual harassment and abuse. As Goldmacher reports in an article from July 26, 2019, Kirsten Gillibrand, presidential candidate for the 2020 election, took the occasion of the Franken debate to accuse some men in the Democratic party of not valuing women enough (Goldmacher 2019). It fits Hirshman’s claim that after #MeToo, the natural feminist allies on the left again split because Republicans endorsed their abusive power holders while Democrats were supposed to stop (Hirshman 2019, 214). Nevertheless, female representation in the Democratic party is growing (215) and the elections of the House in 2018 penalized Republicans because Donald Trump’s presidency alienated female voters, especially white women’s support, while more Democratic women were elected (246ff).

But not only the political realm is changing; feminism gained ground on the Internet since 2003 especially through feminist blogs and online magazines, e.g. by authors who would later become leading investigative journalists uncovering the scandals of sexual harassment and abuse that led to and fueled #MeToo (Hirshman 2019, 135ff). Not only did the Internet make

feminist content accessible and more attractive to a greater number of women by proclaiming the individualistic, and maybe too comfortable, third-wave feminism that in Hirshman's view diverts feminism from unity (121ff). It also enabled the first Women's March 2017, "likely the largest single demonstration in the history of counting demonstrations" against the inauguration of Donald Trump as US president (185). The Women's March was organized via calls on the Internet and provided an occasion for empowering women to build social networks and run for political offices (187). However, as Goldberg writes in an article of January 18, 2019, the Women's March was a political event staged before a movement developed behind it and therefore remained a "moment rather than a movement" as the declining turn-out showed the following two years (Goldberg 2019). Still, the Women's March should be credited for mobilizing new activism among women as Wines and Stockman claim on January 19, 2019 (Wines and Stockman 2019).

For Hirshman, Fox News anchor Gretchen Carlson's suing Fox News CEO Roger Ailes "was the critical moment ushering in the current #MeToo" (Hirshman 2019, 188) because "newspaper and magazine editors decided to go after other powerful men" after Fox News' harassment scandal (189). Since the early 2000s, investigative journalists had tried to uncover the sexual harassment and abuse scandals of Harvey Weinstein, "arguably, the most powerful man in the movie business", that were known around Hollywood (191ff). Weinstein was enabled by a system that empowered and protected abusers like him, as well as money buying him out of any troubles (203). After the first accusations became public, however, more than 100 women have come forward and accused Weinstein, who seems to have relied on the same pattern of luring female actresses and employees to meet him privately with some pretense to then demand sexual treats of them (192ff).

The publicity created by the women of the film industry coming forward enabled #MeToo, which is both a platform of legitimation where victims are listened to and believed, and a platform of storytelling. The aspect of storytelling at the same time empowers victims to speak up as well as offering the space for all stories, which mainstream media cannot provide (Hirshman 2019, 210). While Hirshman claims that the power of social media lies in its power of public humiliation (212), for her "slacktivism" is a necessary but insufficient action to produce social change (219). #YesAllWomen is an instance that managed to raise awareness, yet, social justice movements need to aim at changing the judiciary, the political setting and the cultural framework for their issues (231).

Hirshman finds successful instances for all three concerning #MeToo. Even though Kavanaugh's confirmation as a Supreme Court Judge was a blow in the area of judiciary, the

recall of criminal trial Judge Aaron Persky, who had sentenced Brock Turner to only six months after raping a woman, was a political success for feminism (Hirshman 2019, 240), even though liberals, mostly in law professions, again opposed this feminist progress on grounds of arguments relying on the tradition of libertinism (242f). Hirshman claims that #MeToo's power is in possibly uniting women as a majority because so many women experience sexual harassment and abuse (245). #MeToo needs to politically unify that power more. The cultural realm gives hope that this unity can develop: Les Moonves, former CEO of CBS, a television broadcaster, as someone who sat on top of "one of a handful of institutions that create culture" was brought down over sexual harassment and abuse allegations (252). Even though it took popular, rich actresses to break the silence over sexual harassment and abuse (254), the entertainment industry with its determinative influence over cultural goods in the US is changing due to their braveness. As Nell Scovell puts it in an article from August 9, 2018, Hollywood has long remained silent, but women have become louder, with men breaking their silence, too, after Moonves was ousted (Scovell 2018).

As the above narrative shows, the social background and cultural frameworks against which #MeToo developed have changed since women began to fight sexual harassment and abuse in the 1970s. The organizational resources of collective action activists have built provide examples women can rely on today. These organizations have worked with different repertoires of contention, which have been broadened by the availability of hashtags as a tool of action. I turn to these repertoires in detail in the following.

#### **6.1.4 Performances and Repertoires**

The hashtag is a familiar performance tool in online contention that can be employed in all kinds of campaigns. Previous hashtags dealing with feminist and women's issues like #YesAllWomen used the same mechanism of collecting experiences of a certain group, women who experienced sexual harassment and abuse, to demonstrate the magnitude of the problem. Tilly and Tarrow state that the "Internet-based call to action" is already a modular performance (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 17), and so is the hashtag, which is often part of calls to action, but as in #MeToo can also be the center of action itself. Hashtags can be adopted and used by other actors and for other causes of contention because they combine a general feature, the use of hashtags, and a specific feature, the possibility to formulate a hashtag for any cause (16). Its general applicability is demonstrated e.g. by complementary hashtags to #MeToo such as #BalanceTonPorc and #QuellaVoltaChe.

Hashtags are a familiar way of making claims. At the same time, their use is a form of contained contention because it is allowed and tolerated by the regime. The contentious performance of posting a hashtag is part of the repertoire of online contention that includes other performances like calling for offline contention, in the case of #MeToo e.g. the Women's Marches. Tilly and Tarrow state that the other form of contention, transgressive contention, which is either explicitly forbidden by the government or an entirely new form of contention, "violates standard arrangements" (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 62). They do not explain what exactly they mean by standard arrangements but as they talk about institutional routines in the same paragraph, I anticipate them pointing at the relations between the relevant institutionalized actors of the regime in a society. The regime of the United States is based on a patriarchal order, which allows and sanctions the oppression of women, a consequence of which is for instance a man accused of sexually harassing and abusing women for decades being voted for president, as Goldberg points out on October 16, 2017 (Goldberg 2017). The demand to end a symptom of this oppression, sexual harassment and abuse, could arguably be seen as transgressive contention: The structures of oppression are so deeply embedded in and connected to all areas of social life that consequentially abandoning one aspect of it would imply a system change. In consequence, #MeToo violates the existing standard arrangement of conduct of the regime because it wants to free those relations of patriarchal oppression and could therefore be considered transgressive.

Two points should be considered here, however: Firstly, the consequential demand for a system change that follows from the recognition that oppressive structures against women are too deeply embedded in society to only change parts of the system is probably not what most participants of #MeToo have in mind when joining the hashtag but participants were rather looking for legitimization and using the possibility to tell their stories (Hirshman 2019, 210) or to transform workplace culture as Weisberg stated on April 26, 2018 (Weisberg 2018). Secondly, transgressive contention is usually met with greater repression by the regime (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 60). #MeToo has indeed been belittled by the president (Cochrane 2018) and its rightfulness has been questioned for instance by Woody Allen cautioning against a witch hunt (West 2017). Critics range from warnings against a one-size-fits-all approach against alleged perpetrators instead of weighing the severity of the respective actions (Stolberg 2017) to outright claims that #MeToo goes too far if sexual harassers face professional consequences if their offense was "minor" by Bret Stephens on December 20, 2017 (Stephens 2017). Such actions can be regarded as a means of social control in form of harassment (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 37). Yet, the US government itself did not engage in

repressive action against #MeToo and its participants although it is clear that the president as well as numerous politicians from both the Republican and the Democratic party view #MeToo rather skeptically, e.g. when they continue their support for politicians accused of harassment and abuse.

Even though #MeToo could theoretically be considered or even practically become transgressive if a majority of its participants unite behind the goal of changing the patriarchal system, its categorization as transgressive is rather inappropriate at this point.

The relevance of hashtags as part of the contentious repertoire results from an incremental structural change in modern society: the growing relevance of the Internet for daily social interaction. As Tilly and Tarrow state, repertoire changes that result from incremental structural changes are often more impactful than repertoire change caused by rapid political action (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 19). Incremental change depends on how well claim-making and the organization of daily social life are connected as well as a historical signaling system, which contention relies upon in a specific context, and the operation of the government (20). #MeToo was enabled because the Internet, as the changing structural factor, makes the visualization of a mass of women's experience of sexual harassment as a daily reality possible. Rallying women around common demands is a contentious practice in the US since the 1970s when the first women's organizations started to file lawsuits on grounds of sexual harassment; the signaling system #MeToo relies on. The government, if not by its immediate actions in the beginning, still provided the provocation of #MeToo as a broad action: with the election of Donald Trump, who is openly misogynist, as president in 2016 the atmosphere and awareness for women's position in society changed as Jessica Bennett claims in an article from November 5, 2017 (J. Bennett 2017).

This development also enabled a well-known contentious performance, the political demonstration in the form of the Women's Marches. Even though not directly related to #MeToo because they began already before the hashtag went viral, the Women's Marches of 2017, 2018 and 2019 are performances critiquing women's oppression in society. The Women's March of 2017 started to protest the inauguration of Donald Trump as US president and assembled, as Hirshman points out, a huge amount of demonstrators (Hirshman 2019, 185). However, the succeeding marches of 2018 and 2019 were unable to mobilize similar numbers of participants despite the increased awareness and salience of women's issue through #MeToo: As Goldberg as well as Wines and Stockman point out after the 2019 Women's March, the organizers did not only fail to develop a movement with a common

cause and goal after the first march but the controversy around anti-Semitism in its organizing team hindered mobilization, too (Goldberg 2019; Wines and Stockman 2019). Additionally, Povoledo et al. point out in an article on March 8, 2018 covering the International Women's Day, participating in marches and demonstrations is a matter of privilege (Povoledo, Minder, and Joseph 2018).

Lastly, bringing lawsuits on ground of sexual harassment and abuse is not only the most institutionalized form of contention but also builds on the social movement base feminists efforts of the past 50 years provide (Hirshman 2019; Tilly and Tarrow 2015). The *Time's Up* Legal Defense Fund by Hollywood actresses that provides financial aid for less privileged women to bring lawsuits does not only make this form of contention available for them (Buckley 2018) but demonstrates an instance of solidarity that deepens the contentious repertoire. Part of the legal repertoire accusers as well as accused can use, is, however, a bifurcated force in dealing with lawsuits on ground of sexual harassment and abuse: Non-disclosure agreements (NDA), agreements negotiated between accuser and accused outside of court, have been used to silence women while they also gave victims the possibility of receiving financial compensation they might well be in need of. This measure can thus be used against victims while it can also be a preferable option for them. The prohibition of NDAs that some states considered would thus reduce accusers' contentious repertoire of bringing lawsuits, even though it might target the silencing (E. A. Harris 2019).

#MeToo's mobilization potential to foster other contentious performances has thus been rather limited as the mobilization of participants for offline events concerning women's and feminist issues as well has been limitedly successful.

### **6.1.5 Institutions**

"Movements hover at the gates of institutional politics, sometimes entering, sometimes rejecting, but always in an uneasy relationship with institutions" (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 63). Institutions are "established, organized, widely recognized routines, connections, and forms of organization employed repeatedly in producing collective actions" (237).

#MeToo went viral when a Hollywood actress promoted it. The film industry in Hollywood is a cultural meaning-making institution in the US and beyond as it sets the norms for beauty ideals and normative behavior while it constantly pushes the boundaries of what is accepted as appropriate in mainstream culture (Hirshman 2019, 252). The fact that a woman who is part of this meaning-making machinery spoke out about the deficiencies in this system raises the symbolic significance of publicly criticizing the ignorance of the structural problem

of sexual harassment and abuse. As Scovell pointed out on August 9, 2018, Milano and other Hollywood actresses coming forward were acting against an arrangement of silence and dismissal (Scovell 2018).

The institution paving the way towards the public recognition the issue of sexual harassment and abuse gained through #MeToo was *The New York Times* and its journalists Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey who investigated accusations of sexual harassment and abuse of three decades against the film producer Harvey Weinstein. *NYT* as a medium with high reach and serious reputation lent the accusations and the magnitude of the problem more credibility.

The US president Donald Trump presents a curious institution in the context of #MeToo: Michelle Goldberg, in an opinion piece for *NYT*, points out that he was elected president in 2016, about a year before #MeToo went viral, even though he is both openly misogynist as well as accused of sexual harassment and abuse since the 1990s and despite the fact that all this was publicly known at the time of his election (Goldberg 2017). Furthermore, Trump was named the “Time’s Person of the Year” in 2016, the year before the “Silence Breakers” of #MeToo were awarded this title (Bromwich 2017). One year before #MeToo, neither an institution like the *Time* nor a significant part (though not the majority in absolute numbers) of the US electorate seem to have considered sexual harassment and abuse to be a topic important enough to limit a man’s credentials. Nevertheless, Goldberg sees the outrage Weinstein was met with as “a sign that even if patriarchal sociopathy is more pervasive than we like to imagine, it can be defeated when a culture adopts other values and is forced to live up to them“ (Goldberg 2017). Nevertheless, Trump has mocked #MeToo as Cochrane reports on July 5, 2018 (Cochrane 2018). He was, however, reluctant to express his support for colleagues accused of sexual harassment and abuse shortly after #MeToo unleashed: Blinder and Martin reported on November 11, 2017, that when asked about his position towards Roy Moore, Republican candidate for the Alabama senate elections that year and accused of abusive behavior, the president was unwilling to abandon him as much as to confirm his support for the candidate (Blinder and Martin 2017). In the immediate aftermath of the beginning of #MeToo, even the president who used to brag about his predatory behavior towards women (Bush 2017) was hesitant to endorse sexual harassment and abuse directly.

Another factor to be taken into account is the institution of the gender binary, which sorts people into a gendered hierarchy. The gendered hierarchy is a routinized form of social



organization in the interest of many politicians: A majority of politicians in the US are men who gain from the patriarchal dividend of the oppression of women (Connell 2015). The gender regime is per se hostile to #MeToo because it would be overthrown if #MeToo was taken to its consequence and the gendered social hierarchy was abandoned. Wines and Stockman, in an article on January 19, 2019, claim that #MeToo as well as the Women's Marches helped to mobilize women not only for grassroots activism but that this mobilization created social networks of women helping each other run for political offices as well (Wines and Stockman 2019).

It is necessary to bear in mind that the gender binary not only gives men more powerful social positions, but that toxic masculinity is an inherent feature of the patriarchal system as the concept of powerful masculinity enables the suppression of women. It is toxic because it is a feature of gender that is portrayed as compulsory for men in Western societies and this compulsion creates pressure on men to conform (Connell 2015). The American Psychological Association has recognized the hurtful potential of traditional ideals of masculinity in its 2019 guidelines because of the debate on gender identity that rose with #MeToo as Fortin reports on January 10 (Fortin 2019).

Gender is, unfortunately, not the only routinized social hierarchy in American society that constitutes an institution; racism is another. Just as gender oppression, institutionalized racism is visible in #MeToo from the very beginning since an unequal power dynamic exists between the initiators: social organizer Tarana Burke, who had worked against sexual harassment for years without receiving support and recognition, and a famous white Hollywood actress who was able to pull off the hashtag to go viral (Garcia 2017). Furthermore, any institutionalized system of oppression influences the social position an accuser finds herself in, and the fact that Weinstein was able to sustain his powerful position with the help of non-disclosure-agreements and huge lump-sums paid to his victims (Kantor and Twohey 2017).

These oppressive institutions deeply anchored in American society hinder the social recognition of sexual harassment and abuse as wrong to be truly intersectional despite the empowering support by less abstract institutions such as parts of the cultural and media industry.

## **6.2 Explanatory Concepts**

Having described the basic properties of #MeToo, I now apply the explanatory concepts Tilly and Tarrow provide. The authors suggest dividing instances of contentious politics into

streams of contention, which can then be chopped up into episodes. I choose to consider #MeToo from its start in October 2017 until July 2019 as one stream of contention, thus taking the entire course to the point of writing into account (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 239). Instead of defining episodes within which to search for mechanisms that produce outcomes, I begin my investigations with the concepts of contentious politics and look for their applicability in any episode of #MeToo in order to test the theory.

### **6.2.1 Sites**

The sites of contention are the “human settings that serve as originators, objects and/or arenas of contentious politics” (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 237). For #MeToo, the originator is the Hollywood film industry that provoked the public outcry against sexual harassment because the famous actresses speaking up created more attention to the issue than unknown women criticizing it (Rutenberg, Abrams, and Ryzik 2017). #MeToo’s object is the social structure, which enables and sanctions sexual harassment and abuse, as well as for predators to change their behavior. It is directed at harassment and abuse and its main goal is to “reform workplace culture”, as Weisberg wrote on April 26, 2018. The workplace is often reigned by a hierarchy making it especially easy for predators, mostly males who occupy senior positions to exploit their junior, mostly female, co-workers (Weisberg 2018).

The Internet is #MeToo’s main arena of contention: Not only is the hashtag an online phenomenon itself, it also spread throughout and became the contention it is through the Internet. Twitter as the emerging site of the contentious action also promoted what Rutenberg et al. call a campaign on Moments, its platform for highlighted stories (Rutenberg, Abrams, and Ryzik 2017). This is a weakness of #MeToo because contention in the offline world, e.g. in the form of physical protest during a demonstration, strike or the like, is still recognized as more serious than online contention (Gash and Harding 2018; Hirshman 2019; Thrift 2014). The effectiveness of the Internet as a site is generally debated because the contact to addressees is often not direct enough; as Goldberg pointed out on January 18, 2019, it is difficult to build a movement after mobilization took place online (Goldberg 2019). However, the Internet as a site of contention has no boundaries and can therefore mobilize amounts of people that offline contention reaches less easily. Not even the first Women’s March in 2017 with one million participants rallying in Washington, D.C. and a total of four million in all marches around the US (Hirshman 2019, 185) came close to #MeToo appearing 500.000 times on Twitter and 12 million times on Facebook during the first 24 hours after Milano’s

call (Renkl 2017). Another arena is the courtroom as #MeToo encouraged women to speak up and take legal action against harassment and abuse (Weiser, Watkins, and Goldstein 2019).

### **6.2.2 Conditions**

The Internet as the initial and prevailing main site of contention has specific properties that determine activism online. The click-based nature of platforms such as Twitter and Facebook promotes issues depending on the online traffic they generate. Such mechanisms follow sensationalist logic and complicate constructive debates. Additionally, the word limit on Twitter provides a limited insight into the matters discussed (Thelandersson 2014, 529). Nevertheless, Hirshman emphasizes that Internet conversations about sexual harassment and abuse offer two things that victims often miss in the offline world: legitimation by the mass of victims speaking up and the space to actually tell their stories (Hirshman 2019, 211).

While the space the Internet provides is an enabling condition for #MeToo, the Internet often reproduces the binary gender order that determines offline interactions; not only are some areas of the Internet like online gaming clearly male-dominated (see e.g. Richard & Gray 2018) but any online platform can be employed along a gender binary: While feminists make use of platforms for the dissemination of feminist content, the phenomenon of self-proclaimed male rights activists running platforms for men mostly to complain about women has increased in recent years. Michele White dedicates an entire book to study the relation between masculinity and the Internet whose title “Producing Masculinity” already indicates her conviction of what the Internet does. She also researches the paradox of gendered conduct online despite the body, which usually signifies the gender category an individual is assumed to fit in, being absent in online spaces (White 2019). Gender as a factor of structural power thus plays into online contention.

Other structural factors that privilege people in the offline world also privilege them online. Even though #MeToo’s significance is created by the mass of participants, most of them publicly unknown and “ordinary” individuals, the hashtag only became significant because well-known Hollywood actresses with significant public outreach posted it. Despite the attention it generally drew to the issue of sexual harassment and abuse, Amanda Taub critically remarks on February 11, 2019, that #MeToo seems to have created a consensus that perpetrators should not hold high-status positions instead of that harassment is never acceptable. The discourse might even have had adverse effects on women at their workplace as men are hesitant to work with and mentor women and see being alone with a female co-

worker as a potential threat, resulting in women being kept away from learning opportunities and hindering their work (Taub 2019).

Baer points out that an “interface” between online and offline activism is necessary for its success. She finds that both digital and street activism for feminist issues has increased after 2006, constituting the ideal situation of a mutual reinforcement of both forms of activism (Baer 2016, 22). The conditions for both, however, are different. The legal situation is one of the factors that can create adverse offline conditions of dealing with sexual harassment and abuse: Gash and Harding point out that legal options are still not sufficient for victims of sexual assault and that insufficient legal frameworks are not only a de facto boundary in daily life for victims, but that the legal consequences for their actions influence people’s perceptions of these issues. If the recourse on sexual harassment and abuse is insufficiently serious it does not constitute a barrier towards abusive behavior. Even more worrying is the fact that the legality of sexual harassment and abuse impacts the reception of women’s experience when they talk about them even if they refrain from invoking legal measures (Gash & Harding 2018, 2-3). The conditions women face when talking about being harassed and abused have been demonstrated in public instances such as the Hill/Thomas hearings in 1991 whose deterrent effect was repeated in the Ford/Kavanaugh hearing recently (Dowd 2018b).

Despite Gash and Harding’s emphasis that the legal situation is not sufficient yet, #MeToo changed the initial conditions victims face in court since its beginning. As Weiser, Watkins and Goldstein point out on July 25, 2019, prosecutors take more cautious views in harassment cases now, and judges and detectives are trained to be less skeptical. Nevertheless, they admit that these changes have not arrived at all juridical levels and the conditions have thus not sufficiently changed yet (Weiser, Watkins, and Goldstein 2019).

### **6.2.3 Outcomes**

Tilly and Tarrow define outcomes as “changes in conditions at or across the sites that are plausibly related to the contention under study, including transformations of political actors or relations among them” (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 238). The sites of #MeToo, Hollywood, the workplace and the Internet described above, have indeed changed.

Hollywood as the originating site has witnessed the toppling of many powerful men in the industry as its most visible outcome. Women began to break the silence (Scovell 2018) and it is clear that the industry cannot continue its “old way of doing business” (Rutenberg,

Abrams, and Ryzik 2017). One of the most remarkable outcomes in Hollywood might, however, be an initiative that raises the stakes for #MeToo to become more intersectional: 300 powerful Hollywood women founded *Time's Up*, an initiative including a legal defense fund “to help less privileged women” to sue against sexual harassment and abuse. As Buckley states, the initiative was inspired by a solidarity declaration by 700.000 female US farmworkers with the actresses who first came forward under #MeToo (Buckley 2018).

The effect on the workplace of #MeToo is twofold: While Bowles observes a reconsideration by rank-and-file working men of their assumptions that they treat women as equals in the workplace on November 10, 2017, Taub argues differently on February 11, 2019: #MeToo has paradoxically toppled powerful men without necessarily changing the lives of ordinary women. Both authors also acknowledge that the new awareness on sexual harassment and abuse can create detrimental effects for women: With men fearing to be accused of abusive behavior, male colleagues might be hesitant to work with women because they are insecure about where the line between appropriate and inappropriate behavior is drawn (Bowles 2017; Taub 2019). Yet it is not only this atmosphere hindering women to do a good job; despite #MeToo the backlash accusers face is still an incentive to stay quiet as the example of the Ford/Kavanaugh hearings shows. For women in more vulnerable social positions the retelling seems even more threatening (Taub 2019), emphasizing the importance of intersectional considerations for the changes #MeToo induced.

The attention #MeToo created has, however, induced changing attitudes, not only in the workplace but also at the wider social setting of the gender hierarchy. As Weiser et al. observe on July 25, 2019 concerning the trial against R. Kelly, detectives and judges are trained to and behave now less skeptical towards accusers, effects they relate directly back to #MeToo (Weiser, Watkins, and Goldstein 2019). Nevertheless, other authors share their worry that these changes have not tripled down to all levels of the judiciary. As Bellafante points out, the laws have not adapted to the cultural transformation at a similar pace and can e.g. still ignore a long-term pattern of abuse, which, if recognized, would help a victim's case in court (Bellafante 2018).

In an article written about half a year earlier on April 26, 2018, Williams agrees that even though the concept of “acquaintance rape”, referring to a situation where the victim knew the predator, is not an automatic factor rendering the victim less trustworthy anymore, proving that the predator acted without the victims consent is still hard for women. An important factor in favor of women accusing predators is the huge number of women pointing at the systematic occurrence, which makes it harder to dismiss the issue in general. Even

though the worry that juries might expect several accusers to prove a pattern in the future is legitimate, the shifting norms of accountability are an outcome of #MeToo that can lead to even bigger changes in society's dealing with sexual harassment and abuse (Williams 2018).

#### **6.2.4 Regimes**

Regimes are “regular relations among governments, established political actors, and challengers, and are perceived and acted upon by outside political actors” (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 49). A regime not only shapes the available repertoire of contention, but also the opportunities available to challengers to induce change. Whether a regime is democratic or not, as well as its capacity to exercise control over the population, territory and resources further determine the possibilities of contention (57). The US ranks high on both the democratic as well as the capacity index, factors, which Tilly and Tarrow generally relate to the increased occurrence of social movements (71). The regime does not only determine the atmosphere challengers face when making contentious claims, but also influences the political and established institutions that are part of it: A government is generally restrained by its relation to other regime actors as it depends on them for its survival, while these other actors similarly depend on the government. In the US, “capitalist firms, labor unions, schools, political parties, and private associations” inform the regime (61f).

Tilly and Tarrow, asking whether the political regime in the US as a shaping element of the social and cultural conditions contentious actors face had changed from the 1960s, when the first widespread instances of contentious politics came about, claim that in general, no regime change took place. Despite the occurrence of the Internet as well as violent contention by small splinter groups such as the Black Panthers and the attacks on the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001 by Islamists, contention has institutionalized, and so have the forms of suppression against it. The major difference the authors detect is that contentious performances today are not staged by groups of the population that share an identity, e.g. like workers (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 56).

Zooming in on individual participants of #MeToo provides an example for regular relations among the government, political actors and challengers: In law suits against sexual harassment and abuse, the government deals with the problem on an institutional basis and victims challenge the legality of these actions, partly sanctioned by the political system (Gash and Harding 2018). The amount of lawsuits has grown constantly since the recognition of sexual harassment and abuse as a violation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Especially lawsuits

that involve politicians not only judge their individual failures but set bars for generally dealing with sexual harassment and abuse (Hirshman 2019).

At this point, it seems useful to remark that Tilly and Tarrow use the term regime referring interchangeably to governments and regimes, in which governments are one of the actors. Especially concerning the influence of the level of democracy and capacity (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 56f), the term regime, of which government is only one actor, does not seem useful as the government is the actor determining its level of democracy, in how far its citizens can participate in politics, and also has direct control over its capacities, resources and coercive means, even though it might depend on the collaboration of other actors.

The nature of the regime determines the political opportunity structure, which decides the available opportunities to challengers of a regime (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 59). In the following, I consider the six properties of a regime Tilly and Tarrow deem imperative in determining the opportunities or threats challengers face for #MeToo. First, a regime containing multiple independent power centers provides challengers with more opportunities to find allies in political powers. If there are multiple stakeholders, challengers can ally with those sympathizing most with their cause (60). The most important centers of political power in the US are the two major parties, the Democrats and the Republicans. While the Republicans are no natural ally for feminist causes, neither historically nor ideologically, the Democrats, despite their generally supportive stance, have an ambiguous relationship with women's issues as well (Hirshman 2019). As Sheryl Gay Stolberg points out in a *NYT* article from December 5, 2017, although the Democrats are less tolerant and more critical towards sexual harassment in their party ranks than Republicans, the media and entertainment industry were a lot quicker to bar offenders from their institutions. In politics, the kind of zero-tolerance-policy employed in those industries is often rejected as an impossible approach, which she relates to legality questions weighing in heavier (Stolberg 2017). Nevertheless, within the political regime the Democrats are the most approachable allies.

Next to political parties, religious institutions are power centers with varying significance. As Wehner points out in two articles about Evangelical Christianity and #MeToo, dated December 9, 2017, and May 12, 2018, while Christianity informs many social justice movements, white evangelicals are a strong basis of support for Donald Trump. (Wehner 2017; 2018). Wehner, as well as two other authors writing about the Southern Baptist and the Catholic Church, all point to the discrepancy between the religious institutions' behavior towards women in dealing with sexual harassment and abuse and their

religious values (Douthat 2018; Moore 2019). If this view gained acceptance within those important and wide-reaching institutions, they would be meaningful allies for #MeToo.

Other political actors include non-governmental organizations, the cultural meaning-making film and media industry and businesses like advertising. Individuals can also be important political actors, like the US president whose influence is considered in the chapter on institutions relevant to #MeToo already. The other political actors mentioned are relevant to some extent; however, they cannot be considered centers of power and are therefore disregarded here.

Second, the government as part of the regime and its openness to new actors is another viable issue determining challengers' possibilities. A president of the Republican party, which is traditionally conservative and not a progressive promoter of women's rights (Hirshman 2019) is not an indicator for openness for women's claims. Additionally, #MeToo does not consist of one single actor making claims but what makes it significant is the mass of women standing behind it. As an online movement lacking clearly visible and widely recognized leaders who could voice claims on behalf of the movement, #MeToo misses out on the opportunity to take part in the regime as a new actor because this actor would need to be personified.

The third factor of the political opportunity structure is the stability of existing political alignments. Regarding the alliance between regime actors who protect the status quo of a patriarchal social order, and taking into account that both men in political power as well as complicit women benefit from that status quo, the prospects for change are small (Connell 2015). Yet, this alignment of support for the patriarchal social order has already shifted in the past: It was not only the Republicans tolerating abusive behavior in their ranks but "liberal Democrats included a critical mass of wusses and womanizers" as well (Hirshman 2019, 85). The support for politicians accused of sexually abusive and inappropriate behavior has declined on both political sides:

The result of Alabama's Senate elections in 2017 provides an illustrative example of changing political alignments in the Republican party. Their nominee, Roy S. Moore, was accused of sexual misconduct involving minors some four weeks before the election. The accusations led the Republican party to abandon Moore and his candidacy, even if President Donald Trump was hesitant to abandon him in the beginning (Blinder and Martin 2017). Ever more remarkable was Moore's loss of the election in December 2017 after Trump had



embraced his candidacy against the majority of the Republicans (Burns and Martin 2017). When Moore was considering to run for the Senate seat in 2020 again in May 2019, many Republicans, including the president, warned that this could result in another loss of the Alabama seat for the Republicans (Gabriel and Martin 2019). Thus even Trump, the “predator in chief” (West 2017) withdrew his support despite unwillingness and ambiguity in the beginning, indicating that political alignments to protect predators are indeed shifting.

Similarly, it is not only women in the Democratic party who criticize that women are not valued enough in the party. Al Franken’s resignation after being accused of sexual harassment and abuse showed that the Democrats chose to consequentially support women’s issues instead of dismissing Franken’s abusive behavior on grounds of his political credentials as a popular Black senator (Goldmacher 2019). Further, the party’s hesitation concerning Joe Biden’s bid for the presidential candidacy in 2020 is an instance of shifting alignments among the Democrats: Two articles published on March 31 and April 2, 2019, demonstrate that Joe Biden being known as a touchy person as well as his past actions as the chairman in the Hill/Thomas hearings and with regard to the many qualified female candidates in the Democratic bid for the presidency make him seem a “relic of the past” (Ember and Martin 2019; Stolberg and Ember 2019). This could be a factor leading to the nomination of a female Democratic presidential candidate for the first time as a result of shifting alignments.

The fourth factor, influential allies or supporters who support challengers, often depends on the stability of the existing political alignments. A historical example of an influential feminist ally is Bill Clinton. However, Hirshman emphasizes that even though he has induced political progress for all women, his transgressive behavior towards individual women did not only cast doubt on the sincerity of his alliance with women but later even came to hinder his wife’s bid for the Democratic presidential candidacy in 2016. Her alliance with him made the choice of Barack Obama as the first Black instead of the first female US president attractive for feminists (Hirshman 2019, 133). As Dowd explains in an article on June 9, 2018, Bill Clinton’s past as a womanizer overshadows his quality as a feminist ally today (Dowd 2018a). Unfortunately, there is no influential ally with a similar level of popularity who unquestioningly supports the cause of #MeToo, and, for that matter, feminism, in sight.

The fifth property in a political opportunity structure is the degree of repression or facilitation challengers face by the regime, which determines their options for claim making. #MeToo employs repertoires that are tolerated by the government; online activism and hashtag usage

are not repressed. In general, the Internet as an arena of contention is hard to regulate or suppress, which, however, is not only an advantage for #MeToo: Hate speech and misogynist content is regulated as little as content supportive of #MeToo (White 2019).

A form of repression which individual participants of #MeToo face outside the online realm is the legal situation when they sue for sexual harassment and abuse, which is still not sufficient for victims of sexual harassment and abuse (Gash and Harding 2018, 2). As Williams demonstrates in an article on April 26, 2018, with the example of the Bill Cosby trial the attention #MeToo created seems to have made the jury more assertive towards the victims' views; yet it might also have polarized the discourse even more between those who believe harassment and abuse need to be taken more seriously and skeptics thinking women "asked for it".<sup>5</sup> The fact that the number of accusers in #MeToo gave the hashtag its relevance in the first place might even turn out to be a repressive disadvantage for women who accuse their perpetrator individually as juries might expect more accusers to prove a pattern, making a successful lawsuit harder to achieve for individual accusers (Williams 2018).

The sixth factor determining the political opportunity structure is whether decisive changes in any of the other factors occur. The current political alignments as well as the facilitation of legal action against sexual harassment and abuse are decisive for #MeToo.

As the political party holding the presidency, Republicans withdrawing their support for a candidate who is accused of sexual abuse constitutes a changing factor relevant for the entire regime. Holding members of their political party accountable implies that this accountability applies to everyone in the party. An interesting factor here is Trump's shift from reluctance to support for Moore, and whether the Republicans will hold the president accountable for his own alleged sexual misconduct. As Hirshman states, white women's support for Trump and the Republicans in general has dropped since the presidential election of 2016, even though Trump's defeat in the election of 2020 is far from secure (Hirshman 2019, 246).

The Democrats dealing with their "sad legacy of defending abusers" and making Senator Al Franken step down suggests they are heading towards more wholesome support of women's issues (Hirshman 2019, 244). Even though the adaptation of laws might be slower, as Bellafante stresses on November 21, 2018, the cultural transformation in dealing with

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<sup>5</sup> Bill Cosby is a US-American stand-up comedian and actor who was accused of sexual harassment and abuse by numerous women. His first trial began in 2015, which was criticized for not allowing evidence from all women accusing Cosby, making it easy for his defenders to claim that his accuser "asked for it". Cosby was convicted of sexual assault in the retrial in 2018 (Bowley 2018).

sexual harassment and abuse which found its way into the courts is a sign of hope for better legal possibilities for victims in the future (Bellafante 2018).

#MeToo has caught the attention of all regime actors and is influencing all factors of the political opportunity structure. Even though decisive changes are detectable in merely two of them so far, this is already a valuable achievement of #MeToo.

### **6.2.5 Mechanisms**

Having considered the factors that constitute the base, opportunities and challenges for the contentious claims of #MeToo, I now turn to the circumstantial mechanisms determining its development.

Tilly and Tarrow claim that brokerage, diffusion and coordinated action are among the most common mechanisms in contention. Brokerage, the “production of a new connection between previously unconnected sites” (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 31), is a mechanism at the core of #MeToo: the participating women all live in unconnected sites, their local patriarchal social structures. They are connected through the hashtag because it enables them to share their common experience of sexual harassment and abuse. The hashtag brokers their experience because all of them are willing to talk about it publicly online, no matter how far they might be apart geographically or otherwise.

Diffusion, the “spread of a form of contention, an issue, or a way of framing it from one site to another” happened in #MeToo as well (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 31): The hashtag went viral in the US, more specifically after originating from Hollywood, and spread around the world. Thus, not only the form of contention, the hashtag, but also the issue, sexual harassment and abuse, framed by an uncountable number of women criticizing their societies dealings with it, spread. The local adaptations of the hashtag like #BalanceTonPorc in France and #QuellaVoltaChe in Italy are examples of how widely #MeToo diffused even though their local significance might vary (J. Bennett 2017).

Coordinated action, which is “two or more actors’ engagement in mutual signaling and parallel making of claims on the same object” (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 31), is detectable in two ways; depending on who is defined as actors. If all individual women posting #MeToo are considered actors, then #MeToo is a massive coordinated online action of a huge number of individuals. If actor refers to another level than the individual, Tarana Burke and her NGO

MeToo are an actor coordinating with the online #MeToo, coordinating across the two sites of contention, online and offline.

For all three of these factors the relevance of spread and coordination from site to site changes if one looks at the Internet as an already global site of contention without clear boundaries. Nevertheless, the life reality of victims of sexual harassment and abuse varies according to where they live. Despite one site of contention being global, a meaningful boundary to diffusion and #MeToo in general is that it is unable to create real world solidarity so far; not only #MeToo in the US is criticized to not be truly intersectional (Dickerson and Saul 2017; A. Harris 2018; Hirshman 2019) but the fight for feminist and women's issues is bemoaned at the example of the International Women's Day strikes: Participation in these strikes oftentimes depends on already favorable living conditions enabling women to participate while less privileged women cannot afford it (Povoledo, Minder, and Joseph 2018).

An important question is thus whether the global condition of gendered social hierarchies at the disadvantage for women can be changed if the protest against them is so difficult to unite and foster worldwide. The foundation of *Time's Up* is a good example of first measures that enable less privileged women to take actions against sexual harassment and abuse by limiting the threatening consequences like unaffordable legal costs (Buckley 2018). Such an initiative on the international level would be a start to worldwide coordinated action against sexual harassment and abuse beyond the diffusion of hashtag activism.

Beyond brokerage, diffusion and coordinated action, other mechanisms without which we would "see a great deal of contention but very little continuity" can be observed in #MeToo (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 36). To consider as many aspects as possible to (in)validate the theory of contentious politics, I elaborate on all concepts Tilly and Tarrow suggest, even though not all are equally relevant for #MeToo.

The process of previously apolitical actors becoming political "by using their organizational and institutional bases to launch movement campaigns" is termed social appropriation (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 36). The initiator of MeToo, Tarana Burke, did so already from 2006 onwards, but the actresses who came forward and fueled the hashtag became political in calling on the mass of women experiencing sexual harassment and abuse, too, to do the same and thereby used the organizational tool provided by the Internet and tried out by previous campaigns resting on the same organizational bases (Airey 2018; Garcia 2017; Thelandersson 2014).

Boundary activation is the “creation of a new boundary or the crystallization of an existing one between challenging groups and their targets” (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 36). On a structural level, Tilly and Tarrow remark that contention also activates boundaries that organize social life like class, race and gender. They diagnose most contentious politics of activating one such social boundary, while disregarding the others (109). Looking at the numbers of participants in #MeToo who participate as victims, and regarding the fact that structurally seen, men are in a socially protected position to harass or abuse women, #MeToo emphasizes an existing boundary in the gender binary. Although there are exceptions, the basic division #MeToo creates is women as a social group who experience harassment and abuse uniting against men as a social group who perpetrate. An example of this dichotomy of gender groups suggests itself in the title “Yes, This is a Witch Hunt. I’m a Witch and I’m Hunting You” of West’s opinion piece in *NYT*. This article’s peg is Woody Allen’s reaction to the accusations against Weinstein, in which he claims to be sorry for him and worries that #MeToo creates a witch-hunting atmosphere (West 2017). The author’s sarcastic reaction towards Allen’s statements and her mocking of his perversion of the historic reference of witch hunts as well as her emphasis that the participants of #MeToo act without the institutional or legal support men can rely on is one side of the hardened boundaries in the discourse on sexual harassment and abuse. As Williams points out on April 26, 2018, #MeToo might also harden the attitude of those who think women “asked for it” (Williams 2018). For the skeptics, news like the feminist Avita Ronell being accused and found guilty of sexual harassment feed their reproaches of feminists claiming a moral high-ground they themselves cannot keep (Greenberg 2018) just as much as their feeling that treating all forms of harassment and abuse as equally wrong and punishable is unjust alienates the skeptics (Stephens 2017).

Certification is an “external authority’s signal of its readiness to recognize and support the existence and claims of a political actor” (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 36). The Democratic party investigating and dealing with sexual harassment and abuse more thoroughly than in the past (Hirshman 2019) is an instance of certification as it signals their recognition of the issue as sufficiently serious to end perpetrators political careers as in the case of Al Franken (Goldmacher 2019). Depending on how narrowly external authority is defined, cultural authority can also lend certification to #MeToo, such as popular actors who credibly question hegemonic masculinity concepts. The fact that men in the music industry did so in the wake of #MeToo raises public attention in areas one might not have expected it (Farber 2019). Even

though Connell points out that it is not only men who are complicit in holding up the gender regime but women can be complicit, too, because individual women can benefit from gender oppression (Connell 2015), the certification by these men questioning hegemonic masculinity is even more significant because it goes beyond the initial topic of #MeToo, sexual harassment and abuse, and questions the underlying gendered hierarchy. Their international reach and prominence adds additional weight to their support, even though it does not signal a readiness to intervene on behalf of the claim makers as the certification by an internationally recognized political actor would (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 103).

An identity shift among the claim-makers in #MeToo took place in so far as the hashtag activism revealed their common experience of sexual harassment and abuse (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 37). By demonstrating the mass of victims, #MeToo did not only raise the general awareness but made the mostly female participants aware of their common power by uniting under as oppressed members of society. An interesting aspect to investigate in the interest of fostering feminist causes would be how this new identity as one of the many victims of sexual harassment and abuse can be empowering and not become a narrative of trauma, which, according to Tarana Burke, is not useful as she emphasizes in an interview published October 15, 2018 (A. Harris 2018).

The mechanism of competition within the contention seems of reduced importance for #MeToo as the initial fears of Milano taking over the movement that Tarana Burke had built with her NGO MeToo over years was cleared out by the two women's declaration of solidarity in the interest of fighting sexual harassment and abuse (Garcia 2017; A. Harris 2018). Escalation and radicalization seem to neither be relevant for #MeToo, as the contention continued its routinized ways (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 37).

The aspect of repression, already considered in the political opportunity structure relevant for #MeToo, can take many forms, such as arrest, destroying of organizations and different forms of harassment and social control. While physical threats against #MeToo and its participants have not been reported (even though they might have occurred), harassment and social control are detectable in #MeToo. Tilly and Tarrow stress that the state but also mass-media can play a role in suppression (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 38). Takenaga elaborates an example of the mass media's dealing with #MeToo on June 24, 2019: When the writer E. Jean Carroll accused Donald Trump of rape, *NYT* dealt with the accusations "overly cautious" and the author

admits that the newspaper should have presented this serious matter concerning a sitting president more prominently. Even though this might not be considered a severe case of harassment, it certainly was a depreciation of the credibility of Carroll despite Trump's known predatory behavior.

Clearly, most of the mechanisms identified by Tilly and Tarrow are traceable in #MeToo, if to varying degrees. I discuss how they constitute processes, the combination of these mechanisms producing similar outcomes (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 29), in the following.

### **6.2.6 Processes**

The most important processes Tilly and Tarrow identify coming from their mechanisms are mobilization processes. Mobilization refers to people starting to make contentious claims when they have previously not done so, and demobilization to people who made contentious claims stopping to do so. Mobilization provides contention with a higher amount of resources and forms political actors who change by participating in contention, while those resources decrease with demobilization while actors disappear (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 38, 102). That #MeToo mobilized people in the first place is not surprising as sexual violence is an “enduring mobilizing issue” (Rodino-Colocino 2014, 1113).

Forms of mobilization can vary from recruitment from the streets and universities to sending mails, lobbying and educational campaigns (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 54). The Internet has made it possible in recent years “to mobilize thousands of people on behalf of a common cause” and to cross national boundaries as well as social ones more easily than offline tools of mobilization, even though this mobilization might not last very long (55).

Tilly and Tarrow identify three kinds of statuses that bystanders of any form of contentious politics possess: they can either be sympathizers, opponents or neutral people (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 98). The challengers in contentious claim making can increase their mobilization by turning sympathizers into participants. They can also hope to turn neutrals into sympathizers, and at best, opponents refrain from counter-mobilization. For #MeToo, an increasing crowd of participants in its hashtag activism is the main form of mobilization. As Taub stresses on February 11, 2019, offline events would enhance mobilization because they would demonstrate to bystanders that others have changed their views on harassment and abuse, too, a vital factor to spread the consensus that such behavior is inappropriate (Taub 2019). Even

though such offline events are scarce or even absent from #MeToo, the discourse has continued to be present for almost two years already.

To maintain activism, Tilly and Tarrow emphasize that the group conducting contentious politics needs to be taken care of to be maintained (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 103f). #MeToo is not an instance of contentious politics conducted by a clearly defined group which makes it complicated to take care of. This lack of a group formation is connected to the nature of “clicktivism” remaining online as well as a lack of leading actors who would conduct the care-taking as the official spokespeople of #MeToo. Tilly and Tarrow identify the “collective action problem” as one of the reasons why further mobilization might not occur: participants think others might have higher stakes in the issues and would therefore prefer them to take action instead. Further, participants of contention, whether they are in leading positions or not, consider the “cultural, economic, and social impediments” they face for partaking in contention (121). If those impediments are too high, they refrain from mobilizing.

#MeToo has not created a clearly defined group of challengers, yet it created widespread solidarity without referring to a clearly defined identity concept. The ongoing discourse, which is now a mainstream discourse as visible in *NYT*'s constant engagement with the topic, keeps this solidarity without the constant support of organizational structures; as the magnitude of the problem reached mainstream discourse, claim makers did not need to push for it in an institutionalized way. The social movement base #MeToo builds on has been creating awareness and legal outcomes for decades, and the result eventually creates wider acknowledgement.

Other mechanisms fostering mobilization are allies, certification by external authorities (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 122), new coordination, the seizing of opportunities and appropriation that mobilizes outside actors. We have seen different kinds of allies and certifiers in #MeToo, such as men in the music industry and politicians from different parties holding their members accountable. Yet, one outstanding ally with high reach who unquestionably supports the cause of abandoning sexual harassment and abuse is not in sight. The #MeToo claim makers have seized the opportunity of relative instability of the regime, with the Democrats trying to identify the most viable candidate to face Trump in the next presidential elections and the Republicans eager to find a balance between their president and candidate with good prospects for the next election who at the same time alienates female voters with his misogynist behavior. Emerging from Hollywood, other professions have appropriated



#MeToo in their domains, like academia, journalism, the arts and not least the churches (Collins-Hughes 2019; Dickerson and Saul 2017; Rojas 2019; Takenaga 2019; Wehner 2018).

These mechanisms have also led to scale shift, the “complex process that not only diffuses contention across space or social sectors, but creates instances for new coordination at a different level than its initiation”, crossing boundaries to mobilization that are mainly related to geographical or physical frontiers. Downward scale shift means that action trickles down to the local level from the regional or national, while upward scale shift implies action moving from local to higher levels. Tilly and Tarrow attribute the most importance to upward scale shift (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 125). #MeToo has done both, in that it spread to the individual local contexts of women participating, while at the same time remaining contentious action at a higher and broader level. The scale shift was enabled by the Internet and connected “people who would otherwise have no previous contacts”, what Tilly and Tarrow call mediated route of diffusion (125).

Demobilization is a less well-researched phenomenon than mobilization. Factors fostering demobilization can be the initial conditions for contention, the regime’s response, and the endurance of organizational structures to maintain solidarity (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 122). Even though demobilization seems almost inevitable for a form of contention based on the re-sharing of stories that tick similar boxes, we see continuous reporting on #MeToo. The initial conditions for #MeToo as well as the regime’s response did not foster demobilization as they were not overly repressive. Still, repressive factors prevent the widespread move of #MeToo into the offline sphere: As Taub points out, even though #MeToo toppled quite some powerful men, its effects have not necessarily reached the ordinary mass of people (Taub 2019). And even some accusers with the odds of high-reach on their side have not had an easy path after going public, as E. Jean Carroll’s accusations of rape against Trump show. Be it for the severity of her accusation or for the still-remaining skepticism against victims of sexual harassment and assault, not even popularity protects women from retaliation. Even though this is not the type of bifurcation Tilly and Tarrow describe with states repressing the most extreme activist with the severest measures while being more lenient towards less extreme activists (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 130f), the unpredictability of social repression participants face, at least if they openly accuse someone, hinders mobilization.

There are two options to prevent demobilization: Leaders can either institutionalize or escalate contention (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 130). As we have seen, #MeToo has not escalated or radicalized, and it took place in institutionalized ways of contention from the beginning.

Further institutionalization through the foundation of an organization to unite all hashtag-activists has not happened either. Tarana Burke and her NGO have gained prominence and she has taken new actions such as cooperation with Hollywood writing rooms (A. Harris 2018). If #MeToo participants became members of the NGO and continued their activism beyond the hashtag, it would imply continued mobilization. This has not happened, unfortunately.

A specific feature of mobilization processes Tilly and Tarrow identify is counter-mobilization, which potentially escalates and radicalizes the contention (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 38). An example of counter-mobilization is the reaction to the advertisement video “We Believe: The Best Men Can Be” by the razor-brand *Gillette* published on January 1, 2019. It deals with #MeToo and how it changed the perception of men’s behavior, criticizes toxic masculinity that adults teach boys and calls upon men to change those habits to be better men. The advertisement’s suggestion that men can behave in better ways provoked many outraged reactions on Twitter, mostly expressing resistance against the alleged attempt of *Gillette* to prescribe how men should behave. While Hsu points towards the pitfalls of engaging with trending social justice topics like #MeToo for companies, their picking up the topic of sexual harassment and abuse as well as toxic masculinity demonstrates its salience (Hsu 2019): Advertisements do not only depict a societal discourse but also shape it (Hall 1997, 239ff). *Gillette*’s advertisement and the reaction towards it therefore demonstrates two things: Firstly, *Gillette* was sure to target a customer group that would embrace their supportive stance on #MeToo and took the risk of alienating costumers who would not. Secondly, even though #MeToo is a mainstreamed discourse now, the counter-mobilization online shows that there still is a significant amount of people who do not support its goal of abandoning sexual harassment and abuse. This may be more for reasons of feeling personally attacked, as Hsu suggests, than for actually supporting abusive behavior. Counter-mobilization is present nevertheless.

Despite missing some of the premises to keep up mobilization, like a specific group of challengers that build and keep organizational structures, #MeToo continues as a discourse for almost two years now. It caused changes concerning the general awareness of sexual harassment and abuse, influencing the perception of accusers in legal settings as well as a new awareness in workplaces. The careers of a number of powerful men have ended because of #MeToo. Yet, demobilization due to repression victims still face when they come forward as

well as the counter-mobilization online demonstrate that the awareness created by #MeToo does not always result in positive outcomes. As the cycle of contention #MeToo is part of continues, we will see whether this mobilization continues and is able to induce even broader outcomes.

## **7. Conclusion**

In this thesis, I have exemplified and validated the theory of contentious politics for #MeToo with the help of online articles by *The New York Times* published between October 2017 and July 2019. #MeToo contains the three components of contentious politics; it is contention as women make claims to end sexual harassment and abuse, these claims generally bear on the interests of men and society as a patriarchal organization, and they involve the government because it produces and reinforces these patriarchal structures. Central insights into #MeToo gained during this research are the outcomes of a mainstreamed discourse on as well as beginning changes in the judiciary in dealing with sexual harassment and abuse. Further, the feminist critical discourse analysis shows that numerous actors are involved at different sites, both online and offline, leading to mechanisms that continue contention such as brokerage, diffusion and appropriation. This analysis of the mechanisms behind #MeToo is based on a selection of online articles by the *NYT* that demonstrate a continued interest in the topic in US society.

The goal of this thesis was to (in)validate Tilly and Tarrow's theory of contentious politics as well as an assessment of online contention's usefulness for feminist causes. To (in)validate the theory, I deviated slightly from the approach suggested by Tilly and Tarrow after applying their descriptive concepts to identify the mechanisms that constitute the processes leading to those outcomes: I geared examination towards the mechanisms suggested by Tilly and Tarrow and looked for those mechanisms in #MeToo instead of first breaking down #MeToo in episodes. This approach allowed me to verify the relevance of all concepts suggested by the authors instead of producing a possibly selective account missing other aspects. Having identified the most important of the mechanisms occurring in #MeToo, I then assembled the processes into which they compound to find sounding explanations for the outcomes of #MeToo.

The main outcome of my research is that the contentious politics approach is applicable to online activism. The concepts are easily adaptable, also because even though #MeToo is at first sight an online phenomenon, offline factors such as changes in the

judiciary or physical demonstrations need to be considered in the analysis as these outcomes are relevant offline as well. #MeToo nevertheless constitutes an instance of online contention, as the Internet is the main site the activism takes place in. Thus, I was able to provide explanations for the outcomes of #MeToo with the help of Tilly and Tarrow's concepts, even though these outcomes should be considered preliminary as #MeToo is still ongoing. The outcomes will only be more fully evaluable after some time, e.g. when the cultural transformation #MeToo induced has trickled down to all levels of the judiciary.

For the second goal, an assessment of usefulness to feminist causes, the outcome of my research is a bit more ambiguous. Coming back to the initial definition of discourse as one of several signifying practices, the insight that a cultural transformation from the discourse on sexual harassment and abuse that #MeToo created is already observable renders the contention successful on the level of discourse. However, looking at the experiences of women as well as their material conditions, which are other signifying practices, the impact of #MeToo to change these is less clear so far. Just as the laws change slower than the culture transforms, these might follow the change of discourse more slowly. Without deeming one or the other change more easy to achieve, it seems that discourse can mirror a change of minds quicker than material conditions can adapt. Yet, as the social gendered hierarchy, which suppresses women and privileges men, has perceptible consequences for women's living situations, a change of discourse is not enough to constitute equal social status for all genders. It is unimaginable, however, that women's experiences and material conditions would change before a change of minds, visible in discourse, which deems the outcomes of #MeToo a viable move in the direction towards a more gender-equal society.

This direction is useful to feminist causes because it brings the prospect of achieving equal social status for all genders closer. Even though #MeToo might have polarized the extreme ends in the debate on gender equality even further, it did raise a new consciousness in mainstream society to reflect on sexual harassment and abuse. The general outcome is a good, if basic result of online activism in the interest of women. The fact that it stimulated offline mobilization for its cause to a very limited extent only, however, is an indication that online activism is insufficient to cause wholesome social changes. Furthermore, it needed prominent actresses to speak out about the problem of sexual harassment and abuse to make it a salient topic in the first place. The complaints and critics of unknown and ordinary women, as well as the organization of Black women existing long before the hashtag have sadly not been sufficient to prone society to deal with the issue. This poses the question of leadership for feminist causes in general because even though some women have been termed leaders by the

media, the fact that anyone can equally take part in online hashtag conversation makes it difficult to provide and sustain leadership. An important consideration for feminists should therefore be how to keep online activism directed at a cause and induce participants to rally behind that cause and its leaders. The choice of leadership should be made while considering the helpfulness of prominence in making claims.

The easy applicability of the concepts of contentious politics is an advantage of this theory. It is a helpful anchor in explaining online contention, yet its broadness is at the same time a flaw: The individual concepts of the approach are not only numerous, but they are, despite their general applicability, hither and thither (Klandermans 2008), rendering the approach less rigid and not selective on the specific contention it analyzes. While this is one of the authors' explicit intentions, it is at times confusing during the application. Their broadness sometimes leads to rather meaningless speculations, e.g. whether #MeToo could be considered transgressive contention. As the definition of "transgressive" is rather blurry, this categorization does not help to explain #MeToo. Another example is Tilly and Tarrow's use of "regime" both as an independent concept of which governments are a part of as well as a synonym for government. Such lack of clarity occurs in a number of their concepts.

While my research demonstrates the general applicability of contentious politics to online contention, further research with a more diverse selection of sources would strengthen not only the knowledge on #MeToo; it would also create a broader basis to judge the usefulness of the theory for online contention, e.g. concerning its lack of strictness. While my research provides insights that are not only useful but should be easily confirmed by other materials, the exemplary use of online newspaper sources demands further research providing a triangulated and replicable approach to solidify the findings.

Future research should also come by the limitations of this analysis constituted by the scope of the project, as well as by its timeframe. As #MeToo is ongoing contention, new insights will be found by incorporating developments occurring after July 2019. Another interesting path future research might explore is to investigate in how far other theories of contention from the literature on social movements are applicable to #MeToo. This would presumably warrant the definition of #MeToo in a stricter category than contentious politics and enable a comparison on the usefulness of different theories for online contention. Applying social movement and contention theories to other online contention than #MeToo or #MeToo's local variants would broaden those results as well. Additionally, the research field

would benefit from a more detailed look into the individual concepts Tilly and Tarrow provide. For example, the analysis of different actors at different points of time and at different locations with the help of additional materials to online newspaper articles, e.g. interviews with participants, could provide a more nuanced view on the trajectory #MeToo took. This would provide a better judgment of which outcomes of #MeToo claim-makers intended and which were created by chance. Neither intention nor chance render the development of #MeToo any more or less valid, as mechanisms are similar in many cases of contention and the differences in their success is attributable to many factors (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 140f). Knowing how much steering the development of #MeToo had instead of chance provides more insights into the working of those mechanisms.

In general, the emotional work a research project on a topic full of grievances like sexual harassment and abuse should not be underestimated. Processing the outrageous, sad and hurtful stories that are so central to #MeToo as well as their continuous repetition in different forms in all my material took more energy than I thought. Yet, it was not only the occupation with the grievances that sexual harassment and abuse as a topic entail, but concern with the global implication for feminist causes beyond the US, which I did not investigate. Moving towards true global feminist solidarity would be desirable as a result from any feminist contention and with hindsight I question my decision to focus on the US as a country of the Global North. Even though a pragmatic and feasibility-focused decision at the time that fits the scope of this thesis as well as the literature available on the topic so far, my research is clearly limited concerning the solidarity aspect. I hope that future research can at least build on this project and then provide a fit academic basis for global feminist solidarity.

Regarding the limited changes #MeToo has induced so far, it should be born in mind that success in general is a debated question for any contention. Depending on what #MeToo's goals are defined as, its success varies, and the more radical the goals, the less successful #MeToo seems. Even though there are some observable and certainly valuable changes from #MeToo, they are insufficient in tackling gendered hierarchies, let alone other systems of structural oppression worldwide. It did, however, undoubtedly raise awareness on the widespread occurrence and problem of sexual harassment and abuse and by that began a cultural transformation towards a more respectful society. This achievement is empowering for future feminist mobilizations, which can hopefully build on the successes of the past as #MeToo has as well and eventually change the oppressive structures entirely.

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## Appendix

Date	Number of Articles	Topics /Categories
October 2017	32	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Superstar economy /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- Harvey Weinstein /<i>Trajectory</i></li> <li>- Power of #MeToo /<i>Trajectory</i></li> <li>- European Parliament /<i>International Coverage</i></li> <li>- #MeToo floods media /<i>Trajectory</i></li> <li>- Tarana Burke /<i>Actors</i></li> <li>- Modern love podcast /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Conversation among women post-Weinstein /<i>Changes</i></li> </ul>
November 2017	41	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Israel Horovitz /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- Blinders come off (overview) /<i>Trajectory</i></li> <li>- Your Reaction - consequences of #MeToo /<i>Change</i></li> <li>- Personal account of Henda Ayari /<i>Trajectory</i></li> <li>- Uma Thurman calling out Weinstein and conspirators /<i>Actors</i></li> <li>- Men at work wonder whether they overstepped /<i>Changes</i></li> <li>- Technologies role in the conversation about sexual harassment /<i>Trajectory</i></li> <li>- Teaching activities for the 'Click' Moment /<i>Change</i></li> </ul>
December 2017	144	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Year in Gender /<i>Trajectory</i></li> <li>- When #MeToo Goes Too Far /<i>Change</i></li> <li>- #MeToo in Italy /<i>International Coverage</i></li> <li>- After #MeToo /<i>Changes</i></li> <li>- Texas Attorney General resigns after mocking #MeToo /<i>Politics</i></li> <li>- Blue-collar women in #MeToo /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- How to be a good bystander /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Alabama women in the election /<i>Politics</i></li> </ul>
January 2018	236	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Grammys /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Canada /<i>International Coverage</i></li> <li>- Finance industry cashing in on #MeToo /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- Straight Man - now what? /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Bill Cosby /<i>Actors</i></li> <li>- Can Democrats #MeToo to victory? /<i>Politics</i></li> <li>- Generational divide /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Airbrushing and #MeToo /<i>Culture</i></li> </ul>
February 2018	179	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conservative Political Action Conference /<i>Politics</i></li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sex in the 'Gray Zone' /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Mothers and Daughters talk #MeToo /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- South Korea /<i>International Coverage</i></li> <li>- Children's book industry /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- Special elections for accused lawmakers' vacancies /<i>Politics</i></li> <li>- Radio /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- Talk with Times editor Minnie Driver /<i>Culture</i></li> </ul>
March 2018	167	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Workplace change /<i>Change</i></li> <li>- Submissive sex /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Catharine MacKinnon /<i>Actors</i></li> <li>- Women's Day 2018 /<i>Offline events</i></li> <li>- Oscars (2) /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Korean politician falls /<i>International Coverage</i></li> <li>- Cosby /<i>Actors</i></li> </ul>
April 2018	962	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- NYC city hall /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Advice columns as forerunners of #MeToo /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Bill Cosby (3) /<i>Actors</i></li> <li>- Teenagers /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- China /<i>International Coverage</i></li> <li>- Lilly Ledbetter /<i>Actors</i></li> </ul>
May 2018	178	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Weinstein /<i>Actors</i></li> <li>- Evangelical Christianity's awakening /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- Time's Up Legal Defense Fund/Walmart /<i>Change</i></li> <li>- #MeToo Global /<i>International Coverage</i></li> <li>- School of Visual Arts Manhattan /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- Cannes, Czech Republic /<i>International Coverage</i></li> <li>- What to do with the bad men /<i>Culture</i></li> </ul>
June 2018	122	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Men in therapy /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Archbishop /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- Ripple effect/small networks of women /<i>Change</i></li> <li>- Bible's #MeToo problem /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- Bill Clinton /<i>Politics</i></li> <li>- Jeans /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Harassment Task Force in EEOA /<i>Politics</i></li> <li>- Albany /<i>International Coverage</i></li> </ul>
July 2018	92	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- China /<i>International Coverage</i></li> <li>- Food Writing /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Beauty Pageant Winner gives up crown</li> </ul>



		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>in protest /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Pickup artists /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Trump mocks /<i>Politics</i></li> <li>- French director Luc Besson accused /<i>International Coverage</i></li> <li>- Taxpayers pay hush money /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Instagram account publishing harassers' names /<i>Change</i></li> <li>- Les Moonves /<i>Actors</i></li> </ul>
August 2018	119	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Italy/Asia Argento (3) /<i>International Coverage</i> + (<i>Anti-</i>)<i>Feminist twists</i></li> <li>- Comedian Louis CK /<i>Actors</i></li> <li>- Accused feminist Avital Ronell /(<i>Anti-</i>)<i>Feminist twists</i></li> <li>- South Korea /<i>International Coverage</i></li> <li>- Change in Hollywood? /<i>Change</i></li> <li>- Porn stars after #MeToo /<i>Professional fields</i></li> </ul>
September 2018	237	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What men should know /<i>Change</i></li> <li>- Emmys (#MeToo missing) /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Shame of the MeToo men /<i>Toxic masculinity</i></li> <li>- Publishing in a #MeToo moment /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- Parallels Hill/Thomas &amp; Ford/Kavanaugh hearings /<i>Politics</i></li> <li>- Kavanaugh (2) /<i>Politics</i></li> <li>- Kavanaugh/Cosby /<i>Politics</i></li> </ul>
October 2018	204	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- William Preucil/music industry /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- Art/Sarah Lucas Right /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- Google /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- Britain privacy laws /<i>International Coverage</i></li> <li>- Dating after #MeToo /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- India /<i>International Coverage</i></li> <li>- Domestic violence awareness has not caught up /<i>Change</i></li> <li>- Ballet /<i>Professional fields</i></li> </ul>
November 2018	87	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- South Korea church leader in prison /<i>International Coverage</i></li> <li>- Can law catch up to #MeToo? /<i>Change</i></li> <li>- Hollywood after 1 year of #MeToo /<i>Trajectory</i></li> <li>- Australia/Geoffrey Rush /<i>International Coverage</i></li> <li>- Hotels give out panic buttons to housekeepers /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- North Korea /<i>International Coverage</i></li> <li>- Louis C.K./paradoxes of feminists /(<i>Anti-</i>)</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>)<i>Feminist twists</i></li> <li>- Book about Kavanaugh /<i>Politics</i></li> </ul>
December 2018	105	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Film 'If Beale Street Could Talk' changes /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Cost of telling in Australia/Rush /<i>International Coverage</i></li> <li>- Being a female movie critic /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- Music/orchestras /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- Pre-#MeToo history of predatory congressman /<i>Politics</i></li> <li>- Men and #MeToo /<i>Toxic masculinity</i></li> <li>- Argentina /<i>International Coverage</i></li> <li>- 'Baby, it's cold outside' debated /<i>Culture</i></li> </ul>
January 2019	121	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Male managers fearful of mentoring women /<i>Change</i></li> <li>- South Korean prosecutor convicted /<i>International Coverage</i></li> <li>- Gillette Ad /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Female economists /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- #MeToo back to Black girls/'Surviving R. Kelly' /<i>Trajectory</i></li> <li>- More rapes reported /<i>Change</i></li> <li>- Pixar/John Lasseter /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- China /<i>International Coverage</i></li> </ul>
February 2019	102	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- #MeToo topples powerful not ordinary /<i>Changes</i></li> <li>- Southern Baptists /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- Bill O'Reilly invited causes protest /<i>Actors</i></li> <li>- I survived R. Kelly /<i>Actors</i></li> <li>- City Ballet chooses new leaders /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- Luc Besson /<i>International Coverage</i></li> <li>- Allegations against Ryan Adams /<i>Actors</i></li> <li>- Andrea Dworkin /<i>Actors</i></li> </ul>
March 2019	79	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Spread to Wall Street /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- Mexico /<i>International Coverage</i></li> <li>- R. Kelly /<i>Actors</i></li> <li>- Biden's conduct with Lucy Flores' allegation /<i>Politics</i></li> <li>- Sexual assault on flights /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- Accused Trump aide re-emerged /<i>Politics</i></li> <li>- Black Women accusing Black men /<i>(Anti-)Feminist twists</i></li> <li>- Trump wants accused owner of Patriots at event /<i>Politics</i></li> </ul>
April 2019	70	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Kosovo /<i>International Coverage</i></li> <li>- City Ballet has to take back firing male dancers /<i>Professional fields</i></li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Herman Cain/Republicans /<i>Politics</i></li> <li>- Joe Biden (3) /<i>Politics</i></li> <li>- Trump sticking with harassers nothing new /<i>Politics</i></li> <li>- Me-OW/term catfight /<i>Culture</i></li> </ul>
May 2019	62	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lawsuits against McDonald's /<i>Change</i></li> <li>- Unions representing accusers and accused /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- City Ballet /<i>Professional fields</i></li> <li>- Restaurant culture /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Understand #MeToo in fiction books /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- 'Bitter Wheat' /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Geoffrey Rush gets \$2 million for defamation in Australia /<i>International Coverage</i></li> <li>- Colleges challenges anonymity of women suing them /<i>Professional fields</i></li> </ul>
June 2019	72	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 'Reckoning' by Hirshman /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Art (Andrea Bowers) /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Banning secret settlements not enough /<i>Change</i></li> <li>- Theatre play 'Bitter Wheat' criticized /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Theatre 'Frankie and Johnny' expert for staging sex scenes /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- NYT editor reconsiders handling E. Jean Carroll's accusations against Trump /<i>Change</i></li> <li>- Government transparency fighter fired for harassment /<i>Politics</i></li> <li>- Carroll accusations /<i>Politics</i></li> </ul>
July 2019	75	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Theatre play in Singapore /<i>International Coverage</i></li> <li>- Law: change in how prosecutors look at sexual assault /<i>Change</i></li> <li>- #MeToo episode from 1969 /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Kirsten Gillibrand accuses unnamed democratic rivals /<i>Politics</i></li> <li>- Anger among older women /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Al Franken/Democrats /<i>Politics</i></li> <li>- Neil deGrasse Tyson remains museum director /<i>Culture</i></li> <li>- Is it ok to leave drunken woman alone with stranger? /<i>Culture</i></li> </ul>
	Total: 3486 Mean: 166/month	