

# Trauma and Social Media: The Psychological Dimensions of Twitter's #WhyIDidntReportIt

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**Abstract**— *This paper analyses how social media, with particular reference to Twitter, has revolutionized the nature of political conversations. Social media accounts have become the extended selves of individuals. The recent #WhyIDidntReportIt on Twitter started a collective therapy and unknowingly, started a recovery process for many victims who participated in it. Twitter was able to provide these people a platform free of social hierarchies and social shame, where they could come together and share their trauma. Social media has emerged as a great leveller against social systems that divide and separate people.*

**Keywords**— *collective therapy, recovery, social media, trauma, Twitter.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Social media is an inseparable part of the social life of the new generation. It gives people a space to vent out their feelings, raise objections, and write political opinions. Twitter, the American news and social networking site, currently headed by Jack Dorsey, was founded in 2006. The founders chose its name from the word *twitter* which meant 'chirps from birds'. What they had in mind were short messages, 'a short burst of inconsequential information'. Today, Twitter has moulded itself into many things at once. It is an information space, a social space, a microblogging space, and a political space. Twitter's popularity lies in its ability to head political conversations among the elite and the ordinary alike. Twitter is remarkable for the presence of political leaders of leading countries in the world. Recently, Twitter has found itself at the centre of certain incredible political conversations about sexual abuse and violence.

## II. BACKGROUND ANALYSIS

When New York Times published a news story about the allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein on October 5, 2017, many actresses came forward with their own stories about the abuse inflicted by Weinstein. Alyssa Milano, in response to this article, tweeted on October 16, 2017, that her friend came up with a suggestion to bring together all the women who have

experienced sexual abuse through a single hashtag #MeToo. In the tweet, Milano wrote "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet". Along with this tweet, she attached an image:

Me too.

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

*Fig 1. Alyssa Milano, Twitter.*

This was the starting point of the #MeToo movement, which later moved onto other social media like Facebook and Instagram. A year later in 2018, the Trump government in the US nominated Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court. Shortly after Kavanaugh's confirmation hearings began, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, a professor at Palo Alto University, came forward accusing Kavanaugh of sexually assaulting her in high school. She testified against Kavanaugh in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Though none of the members of the committee, questioned the veracity of Ford's experience, many raised questions about the clarity of Ford's memory since the incident happened 30 years ago. The incident sparked widespread criticism from all corners of the world on social media. A set of tweets from Republican Party members questioning the timing of Ms. Ford's testimony, irked many. Twitter users, known for their political spunk, immediately put #WhyIDidn'tReport into action to show support to Ms. Ford and to condemn the disrespect shown towards Ms. Ford who gathered the courage to come forward and put her traumatic experience into words before media and the court. The hashtag revealed how people were able to come together and share stories of sexual abuse that they had endured as children and how it was impossible for them as children to talk about something that was extremely damaging.

### III. THE SILENCE OF TRAUMA

Trauma is described by Jerrold R. Brandell in *Trauma: Contemporary Directions in Theory, Practice and Research* as “an enduring adverse response to an event” (42). Trauma is a response to a tragic event rather than an event in itself. It is an enduring response that lasts for a long time and in many cases, forever. Trauma is a psychological damage that is detrimental to the healthy development of a person’s psyche. Freud’s analysis of hysteria could be the first psychological study on trauma. In *Studies in Hysteria*, Freud writes that in cases of hysteria, there is always an external stimuli that leads to symptoms of hysteria. These symptoms were fright, anxiety, shame or physical pain. According to Freud, it is the nature of trauma to suppress. Hence, the pent-up feelings are characteristic of trauma. A relief from the trauma is possible only through a purging of these feelings, through a catharsis of some kind. The millennial generation has found that social media is an effective means to communicating their traumatic experiences.

Trauma is something that lacks a language. There is no such thing as the language of trauma. Trauma is characterised by its untranslatability. Trauma’s effects are long lasting because they stay inside the victims for many years, transforming itself into dangerous forms as years pass by. Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* defines psychological trauma as an “affliction of the powerless” (35). According to her, traumatic events disarm the ordinary systems of safety and care that give individuals a sense of control (35). In cases of child sexual abuse, the perpetrators take advantage of a child’s sense of powerlessness to inflict abuse. A child has an underdeveloped sense of self and its power. For this very reason, an assault makes them feel verbally impotent. Traumatic memories are different from other memories. Normal memories are encoded in a verbal, linear narrative that is part of an on-going life story. Traumatic memories do not have a verbal narrative to it. They are encoded as vivid sensations and images (38). So, it is difficult for victims to put these experiences into words. Trauma has a “frozen and wordless quality” (37).

Another reason for the victim’s silence is the social shame. The victim-shaming has prevented many victims from speaking out against their assaulters. Many victims do not speak about their experience because they fear that nobody will believe them. In most cases, the abusers act from a position of power, creating terror in the victims’ minds. And this is exactly what happened with Ms. Ford. Her testimony was questioned by President Donald Trump, the most powerful man in the US. Most of the times victims want faith from the people around them. Most people who survive trauma, do so because of the support and love from the people they love. And this is

exactly the kind of support that Twitter users offered each other through the #WhyIDidn’tReportIt. Users extended their support to Ms. Ford and her immense bravery to come forward and share the story of her assault.

### IV. SOCIAL MEDIA AS EXTENDED SELVES

On the outset, the hashtag is a collective support from strangers to one woman, but on a closer analysis, we see the intense psychological implications of it. Social media accounts have become spaces which reflect people’s selves. Just like name, appearance, and address, the social media accounts have become a part of people’s identities. Social media accounts have transformed into extended selves for many users. Sometimes, these social accounts transform into alternate selves as well. These virtual spaces act as great levellers, offering a sense of freedom to its users. It shatters all the hierarchy that exists in the real world. The trending hashtag section of Twitter has played a revolutionary role in bringing people together as well as against each other while discussing important social and political causes. So, Twitter is also a demonstrative space that has taken the demonstrations on streets and roads to the virtual space. This has ensured wider participation since it shatters geographical boundaries. People from all over the world are able to come together as a global community to support a cause. As Twitter exists outside the power hierarchies, the victims have access to a space free of systemic oppression. But along with the freedom that virtual space gives, it also gives a sense of recklessness to sociopaths to spread their hatred. But the Report and Block options give a sense of security to its users.

#WhyIDidn’tReportIt became a collective therapy for many victims. They were able to find companionship and togetherness in a space where their extended selves could finally lay bare their trauma because it freed them from all the restrictions that society put on their real selves. This collective therapy had no single therapist leading it. There were people taking the role of both the therapist and the patient, helping each other out. The sharing of traumatic experiences in words to a bunch of strangers in an open virtual space seemed to give a much needed comfort to the victims. Most of the tweets were confessional in nature. So, here we see a transformation from the traditional forms of confessions to a priest or to family and friends to friends and even strangers in the virtual space. Most tweets gave glaring insights into the trauma of the victims. Many tweets revealed how the society systematically crushes a person’s spirit through a refusal to believe their stories and shaming. It also revealed insensitivity from the authorities meant to protect the victims. Even though these confessions existed in the

virtual realm, they revealed the reality of oppressive social institutions.

A tweet by Lucy Walsh read, “And because when I tried to go to my highschool about it they backed off because they PROTECTED THEIR FOOTBALL STARS #whyididntreportit adult me knows to be stronger, 15 yr old me got intimidated”. People came to support her in the replies. A reply by Vickeybatson read, “listening to you...sorry this happened to you”. The tweet revealed the how the privileged inflict abuse on the non-privileged. The system always protects the perpetrators. By ensuring that Lucy is being listened to, the user Vickeybatson takes the role of a therapist here.

Helen S Fields tweeted, “I’m revealing this today, in spite of the fact that I’m alone in a restaurant crying as I type, so that other victims know they are not alone. And so the world knows it should believe Christine Blasey Ford. Because the retelling is a new rape all over again. No one does it lightly”. Helen had revealed, in a series of tweets, how she was raped at the tender age of 16 and how fear of humiliation and self-loathing had prevented her from reporting it back then. This confession was cathartic for Helen. This is the kind of process that Freud believed could relieve a person from trauma.

Some of the tweets revealed how many women failed to recognize their experience as a sexual assault because they were too young and wereraised in a system that guilt-shames women and their choices. Jenn wrote on twitter, “I was drunk, unclear on the details...no one was there to back me up. I was already in a place I didn’t feel close to anyone. I didn’t wanna be “that girl” That’s #whyididntreportit I transferred schools instead”.

Judith Herman says that there are three stages in the recovery of trauma- establishment of safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life. Twitter’s virtual space, through #WhyIDidn’tReportIt provided a sense of safety, an environment of togetherness and a support system. It provided them a space free of societal hierarchies to express themselves. By recounting their stories, these people were able to remember and purge the pain suppressed within them and sharing it with others who had similar experiences helped them not feel alone. Shared experiences help people reconnect with normal life. Thus, Twitter here provides people with a new form of therapy, which along with a real therapy would help people in the process of recovery.

## V. CONCLUSION

Thus, in the new millennia, people have found ways to cure themselves through support and love from others by using virtual platforms such as Twitter. #WhyIDidntReportIt demonstrated the power of social media in bringing people together, for form of collective

therapy, helping them support each other and recover together. It is also an active political space that gives voice to those who feel powerless otherwise. And it has begun great revolutions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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