

Framing, Spiral of Silence, and Coverage of the #MeToo Movement

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## ABSTRACT

The 2017 #MeToo movement was the collective response of hashtags with the words “MeToo” to the social media accounts of people who had been sexually assaulted. This study analyzed feature articles that covered the #MeToo movement in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* from October 15, 2017 through April 15, 2018. A framing analysis of the 127 applicable features suggests the alleged assailants were often referenced according to their economic status and were most always men. While observing frames, observed genders, ethnicities, professions, and characterizations in the stories were noted. Featured victims were mostly white women who were usually famous in some way while Black women or those of color were often ignored. High-profile victims received coverage while everyday people and minorities gained little exposure. This thesis used spiral of silence and framing to explain the influences that affected this movement.

*Keywords:* spiral of silence, framing, #MeToo, feminism, news coverage, framing analysis

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## **Introduction**

While sexual assault happens more commonly in the United States than many people may know—every 73 seconds, the percentage of those that are reported—1 in 4—is minuscule (RAINN, 2020). As 82% of juvenile victims and 90% of adult victims are women, they are statistically much more likely to be raped than men (RAINN, 2020). Tarana Burke, an African American civil rights activist, has created means of communication for those who have been sexually assaulted. Since 2006, when Burke founded the original Me Too movement, she has been helping women of color who have been victims of sexual assault find the support they need. After the 2017 #MeToo movement was attributed to someone else, Alyssa Milano, Burke feared her work would become obscure (Ohlheiser, 2017, para. 2). As Milano requested those everywhere to join the movement she was recognized for initiating, women began responding and coming forward.

Without representation and support for those considered to be in a minority group, advocates like Burke struggle to unite a cause. This muzzling effect can be explained by spiral of silence—fear of publicly expressing an unpopular opinion (Noelle-Neumann, E. & Noelle-Neumann, B., 1974, p. 43). Neuwirth and Frederick (2004) asserted, “Individuals immersed in such a limited yet pervasive and consonant climate of opinion are deluded about the genuine state of public opinion and, prompted by a fear of isolation, are less likely to express their own viewpoint when they believe their opinions and ideas are in the minority” (pp. 672-673). When these groups feel their own cause is unimportant or not significant enough to be heard, they might withdrawal into desolation until they can regroup with confidence. Since news outlets hold a power for relevancy, consumers gather newsworthy information from what is recognized from media to be the majority’s view (Neuwirth and Frederick, 2004, p. 673). While those posting

with a hashtag to the 2017 #MeToo were in support of each other, the previous movement for a particular cause—women of color who had been sexually assaulted—was left behind (Garcia, 2017, para. 11). Scholars studying spiral of silence observe that media coverage plays a tremendous role in what is perceived to be the most acceptable view (Neuwirth and Frederick, 2004, p. 676). If media outlets fail to recognize the abuse of a group and only emphasize the acts against a more superior class, the minority struggles to gain an avenue for their own expression and will remain silent.

The method for how media outlets use frames through exclusion and/or verbiage was researched within a sample of #MeToo articles. The way in which a topic is covered has a direct impact on how it is perceived (Aroustamian, 2020, p. 3). Of course, for this characterization to exist, media outlets actually have to deem the subject newsworthy and include it in its reporting; and then, within that news coverage, “all senders—whether journalists or sources—should be regarded as sponsors of frames” (Gamson, 1989, p. 158).

By analyzing how media covered the 2017 #MeToo movement, this thesis evaluated how spiral of silence and framing affected #MeToo features. This study examined articles that covered the #MeToo movement in two U.S. news organizations: *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. Through a textual analysis of this content, the influence was examined. The research questions included: Who was represented in the coverage of the #MeToo movement in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*? and How did *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* frame the #MeToo movement? While previous studies have focused on #MeToo, no known studies have examined how minorities were represented in coverage of the movement.

## **Background**

Before #MeToo went viral in October 2017, Tarana Burke, in 1997, conceived a movement after listening to a 13-year-old girl, referred to as Heaven, recount her own sexual assault. After Heaven confided in her, not knowing how to respond, Burke sent her to someone else, a decision that haunted her. According to Ohlheiser (2017), “The guilt Burke felt became a refrain, a repeated question: ‘why couldn’t you just say ‘me too?’” (para. 13). That is what encouraged her to start advocating for this cause. Garcia (2017) reported that Burke’s inspiration to start a nonprofit, Just Be Inc., to aid those who had experienced abuse, was that conversation from ten years prior. As such a cause had not been accessible to her when she needed it, Burke initiated this one as her own attestation, “Me Too” (para. 2).

The original Me Too began in 2006 with a MySpace page created by Burke and its first grant came a year later. Burke tried to cultivate a healing process and connection for minorities who had been sexually assaulted. Those efforts were redirected with the viral impact of Alyssa Milano’s #MeToo post, the first hashtag of the 2017 movement, which became the face of what was assumed to be a new incitement and projected the movement forward for a different cause.

Because of Burke’s own encounter with sexual abuse, she was motivated in 2006 to help women and girls of color and established the movement with its compelling name, “Me Too” (Ohlhesier, 2017, para. 3). As the #MeToo movement spread rapidly throughout the world due to the attention it gained from Milano, Burke’s purpose would be forever affected. What she had advocated for years for and had not received recognition for, gained viral attention in as quick as a post, a post from someone with more power—Milano with 3.7 million Twitter followers versus Burke with only 155 thousand followers. Ohlheiser (2018) observed, “The data also provides quantifiable support for one of the more popular theories behind #MeToo’s explosive growth, that ‘it wasn’t until powerful and influential celebrities like Alyssa Milano and Ashley Judd

shared their own stories on social media that the movement truly took hold,' said Stephanie Newby, Crimson Hexagon's chief executive" (para. 4). Hence, casting Burke's efforts into the shadows.

As the #MeToo movement evolved, what began as Burke bringing a sense of connection and awareness to a group who struggles to be heard, spread to not only women of every color but also men who had been sexually assaulted. An expansive outreach and awareness, nonetheless, but it eclipsed the progress Burke had made. Garcia (2017) noted, "When Ms. Milano tweeted out the #metoo hashtag without crediting Ms. Burke, some noted that Black women had again been left out of the story" (para. 11). Milano later stated that she had not known about Burke's movement and recognized Burke when she went on "Good Morning America;" however, what was done, was done. Garcia (2017) reported, "'initially I panicked,' she [Burke] said. 'I felt a sense of dread because something that was part of my life's work was going to be co-opted and taken from me and used for a purpose that I hadn't originally intended'" (para. 13). After a woman of color had dedicated a decade toward an effort, with the help of social networking and media, someone considered to be higher on the social ladder was able to evolve it in minutes.

In the year following the 2017 #MeToo, Burke tried to redirect and refocus what is important: healing. This would include bringing those together who have been victims of sexual assault; however, Burke recognized how media outlets have an effect on this in an interview with Harris (2018):

It's hard because the idea of sharing your story has become so popularized. We are in a time where the more you share about yourself, the more people like you, the more likes you get, the more attention you get on social media. So things are framed so that they have to be public and they have to be popular in order to be

valid. What we're trying to do is counter the narrative and say, "You don't have to tell your story publicly. You don't have to tell anybody what happened to you." You have to get it out – but it doesn't have to be at a poetry reading. It doesn't have to be on social media at all. It could be a trusted friend. It could be your journal. (para. 6)

Burke meant for "Me Too" to be something somewhat different than what it became. A movement that was created by an African American woman, that gained recognition because of the powerful white men like Harvey Weinstein, Matt Lauer and Bill O'Reilly who were accused, and white celebrities like Alyssa Milano, Rose McGowan, and Ashley Judd who came forward to name them.

### **Literature Review**

This study utilized two theories: spiral of silence and framing. Spiral of silence can be defined as withholding one's opinion for fear of being excluded or poorly perceived from those of the majority with a more popular view (Hayes, 2007, p. 785). Neubaum and Krämer (2018) wrote, "If one's opinion is perceived to conform to the majority, individuals are more likely to express their stance than individuals who find themselves on the side of the minority—these latter people might lapse into silence. Thus, the minority group, in turn, becomes less visible in public opinion over time, while the presumed majority stance becomes more and more salient," (p. 140). Framing in media includes how news coverage controls the message and response of those consuming it (Siefkes and Alexopoulos, 2019, p.746). Both of these theories were applied to the consequences and reactions of the #MeToo movement.

### ***Framing***

As with any coverage, the #MeToo movement was influenced by how it was portrayed in news outlets. Framing explains how the news organizations are able to use certain techniques to enforce stigmas, stereotypes and have other influences on the consumers (Pennington & Birthisel, 2016; Storer & Strohl, 2017; Barnett, 2012). Framing influences the viewers by the structure and inferred messages within the story. Framing explains how media can sway those watching by this controlled representation.

Clouted depiction can have an impact on many different groups. Whether it is societal, cultural, occupational..., these inferred meanings lead viewers to draw certain conclusions from the recognized messages. Kuhl (2018) explains:

Organizations that are influenced by social schemas, which define what masculinity is supposed to be, regarding sexuality and crime, have difficulty dealing with sexual violence. The way the media frames the news coverage about military sexual assault plays a role in how the civilian and military populations think about it and respond. (p. 5)

That kind of regulation can make media outlets very persuasive entities. What is covered and how it is scripted become the prominent understanding.

When news outlets become the rationale of all things important, society becomes engulfed in this continual process of examining them for frames and themes. As used in media, framing aids in sustaining established dogmas through their coverage (Barnett, 2012). Viewers take in these infused messages and denotations because it is normal. Lucas and Fyke (2014) stated, "Furthermore, as decisions become highly routinized based on past practices in organizations and organizational members become psychologically numbed by repetition of words, phrases, and the meanings and actions they generate, the propensity for critical evaluation

and thoughtful deliberation decreases even further” (p. 555). Characterizations that have been reinforced for so long becomes an embedded force—the dominant way.

Just as media have become accustomed to providing the undertones of worthiness, those presenting it and those consuming it instinctively follow suit. Moody-Ramirez et al. (2015) insisted that “the basis of framing theory presumes the prevalent media will focus attention on newsworthy events and place them within a sphere of meaning” (p. 4). Along with every other significant story, #MeToo coverage will relay a certain message. Those that have been abused are not numb to the influence of media outlets.

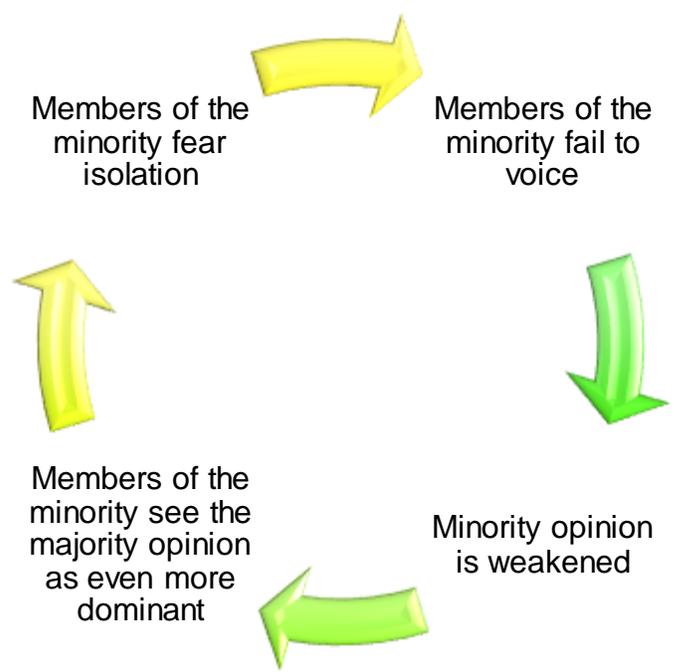
Victims may also face a certain kind of scrutiny when they decide to come forward and detail the crime done against them. Starkley et al. (2019) observed how the victims were described/framed in the news attention they received after speaking out about the wrongdoing and found they all endured some type of adverse feedback. When this is the outcome, the impact of media prove to be an influential force. Aroustamian (2020) confirmed, “It seems that rape victims are more and more being re-victimized by the media as somehow being blame-worthy for the pain inflicted on them by their attackers” (p. 5). This time the victimization is done at the media’s hand. Since it takes enormous strength and courage to give a report such as this and face the perusal that follows, many accounts will go unheard.

### *Spiral of Silence*

Spiral of silence pertains to the fears of stating an unpopular opinion and becoming secluded and, “the idea of isolation of the self seems to connote a sense of separation or quarantine from others” (Neuwirth, Frederick, and Mayo, 2007, p. 452). To avoid that seclusion, Moreno-Riaño (2002) included that “an environment dominated by a majority pressures individuals to conform to the majority opinion or face isolation” (p. 66). Since minorities are

already lacking in numbers, that feeling of ostracization could become even more formidable whether substantiated or not. Duncan et al. (2020) wrote, “If the characteristics of the discourse facilitate a spiral of silence or spur corrective expression, audiences may perceive public opinion to be more polarized than it is” (p. 193). The existence of doubt, however, prevails. Spiral of silence explains that those who do not want to risk being secluded or outed for what they believe to be an unpopular opinion will remain silent rather than chance the outcome.

**A Schematic Representation of the Spiral of Silence Theory**



**Figure 1.** *Diagram of the theory of spiral of silence (Gao, 2019).*

Studies have been done to test the causes and existence of spiral of silence. Chen (2018) conducted an online two-wave panel survey that was given a week before and after the 2016 Hong Kong Legislative Council Elections. There were 1954 participants in this stratified quota sampling that completed the survey. Chen (2018) suggested people withhold their opinions if they believe it is contrary to what they have observed the majority’s to be and will only voice

their opinion if it is similar to the crowds (p. 3918). Bowen and Blackmon (2003) confirmed, “People's willingness to express their opinions is influenced not only by their own personal opinions, but also by their external environment, particularly what they perceive as the prevailing ‘climate of opinion’. When they are not sure that they agree with the majority, people are reluctant to express their opinions” (p. 1396). The common view, as per spiral of silence, is formulated through organized limitations (Chen, 2018, p. 3919). If it seems the public is only interested in a portion of those who are victims of sexual abuse, then others will not see the progression in the cause. Progression for some, stagnancy or regression for others. Chen (2018) contended, “Those who have an innate fear of becoming socially ostracized and perceive themselves as having the minority views in an incongruent opinion climate will be less willing to speak out” (p. 3920). Thus, the concern of isolation takes its toll.

### ***Spiral of Silence and Feminism***

Since minority groups may not have the access or backing they need, they are unable to gain momentum for their purpose. Without a supportive avenue for expression, these groups may lose hope. Clemente and Roulet (2015) wrote, “The spiral of silence approach posits the existence of a vicious circle: the longer members of a minority fail to express their views, the more unstoppable the spiral of silence becomes” (p. 101). Not having the opportunities that superior groups have will create an inevitable suppression. Even in groups that exist to bring awareness to inequalities such as feminism, Breines (2002) reported that “for black women this was more complicated than for white women who, as part of the dominant race, could with more anger and assurance reject white men. White women’s responses to gender trouble were strikingly different from black women’s, simpler perhaps” (p. 1125). If women of color feel their stories will be viewed unimportant or their cause will be deemed irrelevant to the rest, then they

may not be encouraged to carry on with their purpose. Battaglia, Edley, and Newsom (2019) wrote about the struggle of this balance, “Activists who speak and work against hegemonic norms often have to build coalitions, forcing them to choose between oppressions that need the most aggressive action. Both conservative and progressive arguments often neglect multiple and alternative narratives and oppressions,” (p. 134).

When it is anticipated that the majority will be the united voice that is heard and accepted, the minorities will remain in the shadows. Those who are not affected by it may not even take notice. Clemente and Roulet (2015) asserted that “theory bridges microlevel behaviors—the decision to speak up or stay silent—and macrolevel consequences—the emergence of dominant opinions and social norms” (p. 101). As many stories emerge during a movement, those that have been suppressed will continue to be as those with the most prominence gain recognition. As with feminism throughout history and with the #MeToo movement, white women seemed to be at the forefront of the cause. Breines (2002) observed that “Black women felt invisible to white women, even when they were directly relating to them” (p. 1123). Even with them sharing the similarities of womanhood and being victims, white women keep their place in the spotlight while Black women and women of color remain in the background.

When those in the majority continue to express their thoughts, this muted effect will only worsen as those who consider themselves as having the minority view see the more common ones expanding (Clemente and Roulet, 2015, p. 101). While those in the minority do not necessarily have an opposing view, they are still not seeing the support for their own cause that relates specifically to them and are still affected by that silencing ramification. Breines (2002) emphasized, “The critical charge against white feminists was their analysis, the focus on gender

as the sole explanatory factor in the subordination of women, their apparent ignorance of and insensitivity to the intersection of gender, class, and race in African-American women's lives" (p. 1123). Feminism and the #MeToo movement were transformed into what was supposed to be a collective group for all women; but in doing so, Black women and women of color within them become invisible.

### ***Influence of Media Messages***

While those being featured gain a sense of recognition and credibility, because "the media provide authority and saliency," those who are not receiving that coverage are not going to feel the same (Clemente and Roulet, 2015, p. 102). The momentum will get lost with those who feel there is no channel or notability for their purpose. Jeffres, Neuendorf, and Atkin (1999) noted, "The traditional view of the spiral of silence has focused on conformity, fear of isolation, and fear of negative sanctions that could come from within or outside one's group" (p. 117). When individuals think there are few others who share their perspective or who are experiencing similar infractions, they will be reluctant to come forward. If the cause is not recognized in media outlets, then one may question the response they will receive. The majority view gains attention through the assistance of news outlets (Clemente and Roulet, 2015, p. 102). Jeffres et al. (1999) insisted, "More than ever before, people understand the power of the media and the power of reported public opinion" (p. 128). In order to receive recognition and be seen as public opinion, one has to first gain the media's attention.

Celebrities and public figures are not immune to the spiral of silence. In fact, with them already being in the spotlight, they may be even more cautious when voicing their opinion. As Clemente and Roulet (2015) suggested, "Both public opinion and field opinion are collective expressions of dominant views, arising from the aggregation of many individual actors' voices"

(p. 102). What is said is reflective of only the views of those who decide to speak up, and many do not. While those actors who think their view is not popular will be less apt to speak up, those in the public light will be more likely to express their thoughts or feelings on a subject when they feel that view is more commonly accepted (Clemente and Roulet, 2015, p. 103). When something seems to be the only opinion or stance on a matter, it becomes precisely what is esteemed to be the supported view. Jeffres et al. (1999) noted that “there is tantalizing evidence that there does exist racial differences in people’s concerns regarding the impact of their expressed opinion” (p. 127). Those conveying the same view as what is seen as a majority opinion or purpose are more comfortable with adding their vote or message to it. This is what creates the spiral of silence—those considering themselves amongst the few who are terrorized by being identified as such (Clemente and Roulet, 2015, p. 111). Their stories repressed; the movement goes on even without those in the public light who fall into this reclusive category.

How this solitary effect of suppressed opinions impacts others has been observed. Hayes (2007) conducted a study that was administered to 815 university students. The survey consisted of a scenario with questions to which the students responded. Hayes (2007) concluded that individuals fear being associated with an unfavorable view will lead to social separation and thus become reluctant to speak it. When minorities remain silent, so do their perspectives, and their numbers are not including or publicized (p. 785). When those having views parallel of those as the least common, or the seemingly unfavorable are not seeing supported representation, their view may dissolve into oblivion.

If media outlets are already excluding a minority group, then they will continue to be withdrawn and will be less compelled to add their own thoughts and insights to the disputation. According to Matthes, Knoll, and von Sikorski (2018), “it can be argued that nonverbal reactions

are perceived as an additional cue that particular views are unwanted and therefore ostracized” (p. 7). When others with the same status with similar experiences are coming forward, one may, however, feel compelled to take action (Hilverda, van Gils, and de Graaff, 2018). Without being in that group and of an even smaller number, that motivation may not exist. Participation is deterred with the hesitation that surround coming forward and expressing one’s view (Hayes, 2007, p. 798). Spiral of silence would pertain to not only those who have been sexually assaulted, but also those who never quite felt supported by the #MeToo movement and felt that they were even more secluded or shadowed by it.

### ***Media Coverage of Sexual Assault***

How media outlets cover a topic greatly influences how the audience understands the situations within. Sexual assault has historically been downplayed in media [i.e. “a woman was raped” not “a man raped a woman”] and even questions the woman’s motives or decisions in the matter (Gravelin, Biernat, and Baldwin, 2019). Emphasis has been focused on what the victim wore as if to explain the man not having control of the situation and only reacting in a natural way to it...as if to shift all the blame to the woman. Sampert (2010) observed from news articles that “other myths suggest that victims are responsible through their actions for their own victimization or that men with good reputations do not rape women” (p. 304). Gjika (2020) evaluated the news coverage of the Steubenville, Pott and Coleman assault cases over a 13-month timeframe. Her study included articles from *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *CNN*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Yahoo*. Gjika (2020) argued, “Mass media portrayals of crime are important because they both reflect and contribute in shaping public opinion” (p. 2). The way in which the story is presented affects the clarity of the audience’s perception. Those representations have been passed along throughout centuries of news coverage.

These depictions influence the viewers' interpretation of the coverage. Sampert (2010) maintained that "the inclusion of the words 'dimly lit' suggests that the woman was doing what she had been warned not to do. She was exposing herself to danger by walking in an unsafe place" (p. 326). With this type of a suggestion, the blame transfers from the man to the woman. From Wright and Tokunaga's (2016) observation of media coverage, they found that "media often depict women as though they were sexual objects. The more men are exposed to such depictions, the more they may think of women as entities that exist for male sexual gratification (specific scripting)" (p. 958). With this influence women become mere objects, and guilt or shame becomes nonexistent in them being observed as such with the responsibility falling on the woman to be overly cautious in every situation. As Sampert (2010) confirmed, "Instead, women were warned to remain vigilant" (p. 326).

While sexual assaults have not only portrayed whose fault the crime is, it can also suggest that no violation even occurred. Armstrong and Mahone (2017) found, "Similarly, 'rape myths' have arisen in public vernacular, which suggest that women are aroused by being sexually dominated or that women like to be talked into having sex" (p. 101). Lykke (2016) confirmed that "media reinforce the cultural idea, entrenched in the US legacy of White men's ownership of Black women's bodies (as slaves), that Black women are "Jezebels": promiscuous women with insatiable appetites who invite the sexual advances of White men with lewd behavior and therefore cannot be raped" (p. 241). If this is the way media outlets are shaping the coverage of Black women, then they are never presented as victims at all but instead understood as accepting of the experience.

When the majority group is the only one being presented as victims in coverage of a movement, spectators become influenced by that. This is problematic because "...how the media

present an event or issue—which aspects of a story are emphasized, the interpretative lens through which it is explained—can determine how social problems are defined, and the level of support they attract” (Gjika, 2020, p. 3). Activists like Burke are met by these obstructions when trying to gain recognition for a cause. Lykke (2016) insisted, “Feminist intersectionality posits that when racialized and gendered systems of power intersect, Black women are multiply marginalize” (p. 242). When these filters are applied, the outcome can be significantly influenced. O’Boyle and Li (2019) asserted that “rape myths are stereotypes that include the presentation of the victim as exaggerating the seriousness of the sexual encounter, as acting irresponsibly, drinking, flirting, changing the facts, or outright lying” (p. 436). How an article is written assist in how the article is inferred. Gjika (2020) suggested, “The novelty of these platforms, and the consequences of their powerful features, became the story, diminishing the sex crime in each case, and detracting from any serious discussion of the role of social structures such as gender, race, and class that sanction and normalize sexual violence” (p. 12). If the coverage continues to indicate there was no crime or what happened was somehow normal, those consuming the news remain oblivious to the facts.

While those who have been sexually assaulted recognize a crime has been committed against them, getting others to understand their situation may not be so easy. Stubbs-Richardson, Rader, and Cosby (2021) observed, “Applied to criminal victimization, just world beliefs lead to the assumption that victims must have done something to cause their own victimization, shifting the focus away from perpetrators” (p. 92). The guilty party then has fewer people casting a negative light on them while the victim is somehow seen as the wrongdoer. O’Boyle and Li (2019) noted that “newspaper stories most often focused on a single case, and not on the issue as a whole, which would lead to more framing of individual behavior, as the literature suggested”

(p. 445). With diverted blame and ignorance to the crimes being committed, it seems only part of these stories are being told and the dots are not getting connected.

If rapes have been historically acknowledged as the victim's fault, that attitude has been manufactured through the society in which they exist. Stubbs-Richardson, Rader, and Cosby (2021) wrote, "The pervasiveness of rape in a society is not only a by-product of actual rape instances but also of how rape is constructed by society. The social construction perspective argues that social, cultural, and historical meanings shape individuals' attitudes and beliefs toward social topics" (p. 91). Media bathes the public in its own recognition of the topic. O'Boyle and Li (2019) emphasized that "alcohol consumption and peer pressure at elite universities are huge obstacles to criminal reports, and the lack of student advocacy by universities, by society and by the media—as shown in this study—continue to lay the heaviest blame on the victims of campus sexual assault" (p. 446). Victim blaming does nothing to discourage the criminals who are committing the crimes.

When a crime has been commonly recognized as playful banter, one may not question it to be anything else. Phillips and Chagnon (2021) pointed out, "Theoretically, rape culture is used to posit that sexual violence operates on a continuum of normative heterosexual behaviors that are culturally conditioned as aggressive" (p. 49). Some may only see this as satisfying a healthy sexual appetite. Authority is attributed through societal social norms according to gender (Stubbs-Richardson, Rader, and Cosby, 2021, p. 92). This can be instilled through the observations of those who are consuming what media outlets deem to be normal. Without motivation or encouragement to change, nothing will. If the society was aggressive in rectifying the climate of sexual abuse, then men would be more likely to aid in the elimination of these acts

as well (Armstrong and Mahone, 2017, p. 99). With media being a part of the problem instead of the solution, the blame continues to be attributed to the wrong source.

### ***Superiority Breeds Inferiority***

Media outlets have instilled a confidence in perpetrators through the social norms that have been created by preconditioned influences of spiral of silence and framing. When framing dictates the narrative of media, victims have to endure further scrutiny. Waterhouse-Watson (2012) confirmed that “the program persistently renames alleged sexual assaults as ‘group sex’, or names them in other ways that obscure the nature of the alleged acts, subtly and repeatedly implying that the women who reported the incidents as sexual assaults were untruthful and therefore not credible witnesses” (p. 65). The perpetrators use these discrepancies against their victims who are custom to seeing these types of reports. An assailant knows they can take advantage of certain situations. Nason, Rinehart, Yeater, Newlands, and Crawford (2019) observed, “the presence of an existing relationship with the perpetrator may increase the likelihood that college administrators, friends, and family members will not believe or support a victim of sexual assault” (p. 331). That fear is generated from the perceived authorities the aggressor has acquired: race, gender and economical status being the most prevalent. Bridges et al. (2020) emphasized, “Traditional gender norms may also contribute to individual women feeling as if they need to remain in uncomfortable situations to appease men” (p. 12).

Coulter et al. (2017) observed, “Each factor is tied to one’s social identities in specific ways, thereby influencing sexual assault risks. For example, discrimination may contribute to dehumanizing specific groups of people and putting them at risk for violence” (p. 733). Since each of these values attribute to how much social standing someone has, the more someone has accumulated, the more power they will have. And when a person or persons are associated with

an organization (i.e., football and other sport leagues) and have fans or followers through it, to blame the assailant or assailants would harm and bring negativity to the system as well. It will be perceived as an offense on the admired associations if it is accused of being approving of sexually violent activity (Waterhouse-Watson, 2012, p. 67). The situations in which these perpetrators engage themselves in are those they feel confident are under their control. They depend on that power to take advantage of those they consider to be less privileged than they are.

Those considered to be inferior by their perpetrator are more susceptible to these sexual crimes because of that perceived lack of power (Gibson et al., 2019, p. 218). In 2017, the viral effect helped the voices of these women unite to be heard, and Gibson et al.'s evaluation examines what may have inspired victims during the #MeToo movement to speak up. Several studies have since observed this movement to determine what encouraged these women to join this cause (Battaglia et al., 2019; de la Garza, 2019; Phipps, 2019). Gibson et al. (2019) concentrated on seven elements for their study that reflected what they found to have influenced the 2017 #MeToo movement. A few of those include “the grassroots movements against sexual misconduct, the reckoning was the celebrity attention, the safe space of social media...” (Gibson et al., 2019, pp. 219-222). While some came together, others—minorities—got lost in the crowd.

With every sexually abused woman, their assailant holds the power. Alone, these women feel the downward funneling effect that leads their voices into silence. For minorities, that quietness seems even more prominent. Rutgers University historian Prof. Deborah Gray White asserted that through prejudice of Black women and the possession of their bodies, this subjection has been condoned since the origination of slavery (Whack, 2017, para. 6). This can make these victims feel like they have nowhere to turn. Shapiro and Neuberg (2008) wrote, “The impetus to conform to salient societal norms may be especially compelling for readily

stigmatizable individuals and members of low-power groups” (p. 878). The more alone someone feels, the less likely they will be to seek help or believe there is even any assistance for them.

With #MeToo, some found an avenue for their voice, but that was not the case for everyone.

While mainstream media emphasized the more famous instances, the majority of these crimes do not ever get escalated to authority figures because the victims themselves remain silent, which can be attributed to the attacker’s superior standing (Gibson et al., 2019, p. 218). Those who consider themselves outnumbered, alone, or in the minority will struggle to find their courage and are less likely to feel they can encourage a united front. According to Gibson et al. (2019), “While there has been some accountability in celebrity cases, other victims continue to ponder the reality of their options” (p. 223). With limited resources and the lack of power, the abused go unheard.

### **Research Questions**

This thesis examined 127 published #MeToo movement articles, 79 in *The Washington Post* and 48 in *The New York Times*. This textual analysis included observing how spiral of silence and framing theory affected the coverage. The research questions included:

**RQ1:** Who was represented in the coverage of the #MeToo movement in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*?

**RQ2:** How did *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* frame the #MeToo movement?

### **Methodology**

#### ***Framing Analysis***

A framing analysis was used to examine what was included and excluded from media coverage of the #MeToo movement. As women began to go public with their accounts of sexual assault in 2017, media started covering some of their stories. For this study, 127 articles that

covered the #MeToo movement were evaluated. A framing analysis explores text to better discern what information is emphasized and what gets ignored. Pan and Kosicki (1993) wrote, “Framing is viewed as placing information in a unique context so that certain elements of the issue get a greater allocation of an individual's cognitive resources” (p. 57). Data is distributed to consumers through those means of dissemination.

### ***Sample***

To eliminate influenced or biased content, these articles did not include any first person or opinion pieces, editorials, reviews, op-eds, commentaries, or letters to the editor. To be a part of this study, the article must reference the #MeToo movement and be the main topic of the story. If the article is mostly focused on the coverage of a trial, award show, or political agenda and just simply stated that during the time of the #MeToo movement it was more significant or appropriate, it was not included.

Articles were collected from the national news organizations *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* on the Gale Academic Onefile search engine. These outlets were chosen because of their expansive U.S. audience: *The New York Times* having over 7.5 million digital and print subscribers in 2020 (Tracy, 2021, para. 4) and *The Washington Post* reaching, in April 2020, 638 million page views (WashPostPR, 2020, para. 1). Each individual article was considered one unit of analysis. The #MeToo post from Alyssa Milano that encouraged those who had been sexually abused to write “Me Too” and catapulted this movement into headlines was shared on October 15, 2017, and these articles were written within the next six months that followed her post. This study encompasses those articles written from October 15, 2017 – April 15, 2018. During this time, the movement would gain significant coverage due to the prominent

men who were accused and the well-known women who came forward. Each piece was read multiple times to determine the frames within the coverage.

The process consisted of collecting the articles from Gale Academic Onefile that fell within the specific timeframe and searched with the signal phrase—#MeToo. After reading the article, the gender (men, women, or non-binary), ethnicity, and occupation were recorded of the victims listed within the published work. The gender and ethnicity of the journalists were noted as well. How media outlets framed this coverage, which will include any implications or accusations that it was somehow the victim's fault, was documented. This documentation was done by locating verbiage and identifiers within every applicable #MeToo article from *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*.

### **Findings**

Between *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, there were 127 articles published that specifically covered victims and referenced the #MeToo movement from October 15, 2017, through April 15, 2018. This timeframe was chosen to correlate with the first #MeToo hashtag Alyssa Milano posted. The movement would receive momentous recognition over the following six months. *The Washington Post* published the majority of these articles, 79. *The New York Times* covered 48 articles with the same qualifying factors, featuring #MeToo. The only articles included in this study are those whose main topic was the #MeToo movement but excluded any first person or opinion pieces (i.e. trials, award shows, and/or political agendas that superseded the movement). Within the findings of a framing analysis, it was observed that these articles mostly focused on high profile accounts—involving celebrities, politicians, and the like. High profile cases included those who are considered public figures while low profile would relate to private citizens not having a public standing.

More than 30%, 39 articles, referenced how different industries had been affected by the #MeToo movement. About 18% of those articles intertwined #MeToo and the industry in the title. Some examples of those are “In a Prestigious High School Math and Science Program, Alumni Say #MeToo,” “Children’s Book Sector Reckons with #MeToo,” “Bound by History, Two Colleges Confront Their #MeToo Moment,” “The NBA has been Progressive on Sexuality, Gender and Human Rights. How will it Handle #MeToo,” “How Some in the Finance Industry are Trying to Cash in on #MeToo,” “The #MeToo Movement hits the Medical Field,” and “In Days after Grammys, a #MeToo Spark Comes to Music.” Other articles began with this connection in the lead. One of which was Feuer (2018):

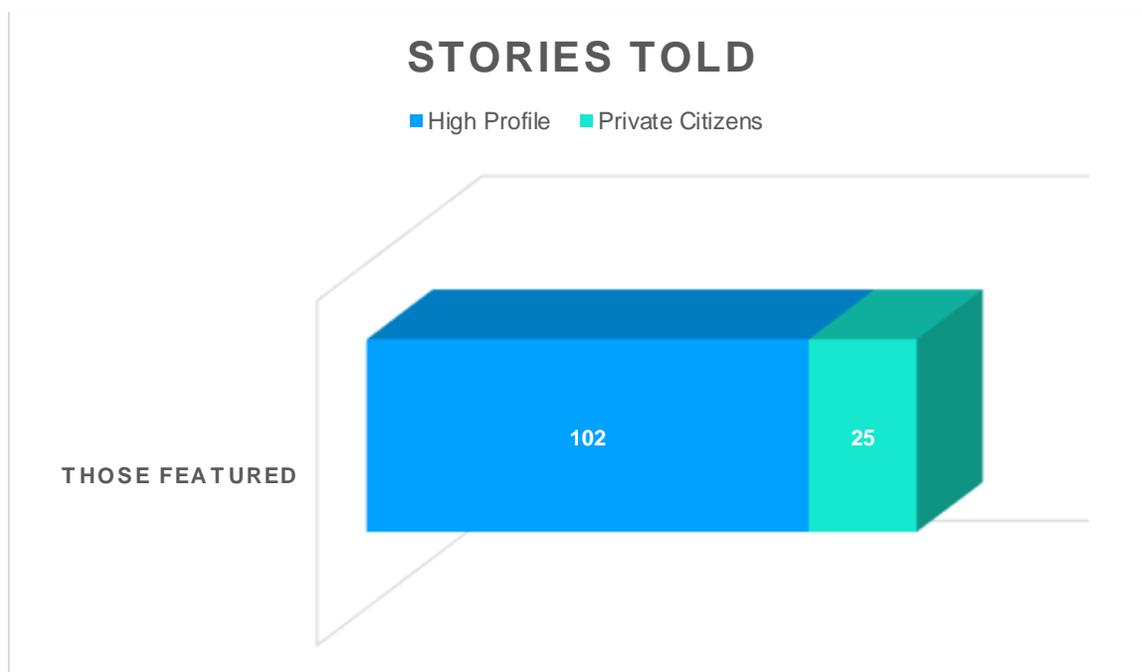
In the last few months, the #MeToo movement has broken down walls of traditional male bastions in Hollywood, the news media and Washington. Now, a criminal trial in Brooklyn is poised to expose a world where activists have not yet gone – the one behind bars. (para. 1)

Bonesteel (2017) wrote, “Inspired to speak out by the burgeoning #MeToo movement, former Olympic gold medalist McKayla Maroney announced early Wednesday on Twitter that she had been molested by Larry Nassar...” (para. 1). And Hesse and Zak (2017):

The sound you hear is a million men shaking in their wingtips and cowboy boots – men who are experiencing, perhaps for the first time, the kind of enveloping unease and fear that they’ve triggered in women, to some degree, for years. The flip side of the #MeToo campaign, in which legions of women on social media have revealed their experience with abuse, is something like #YouToo?, in which every day another prominent man is frogmarched into the spotlight for his behavior. (para. 1)

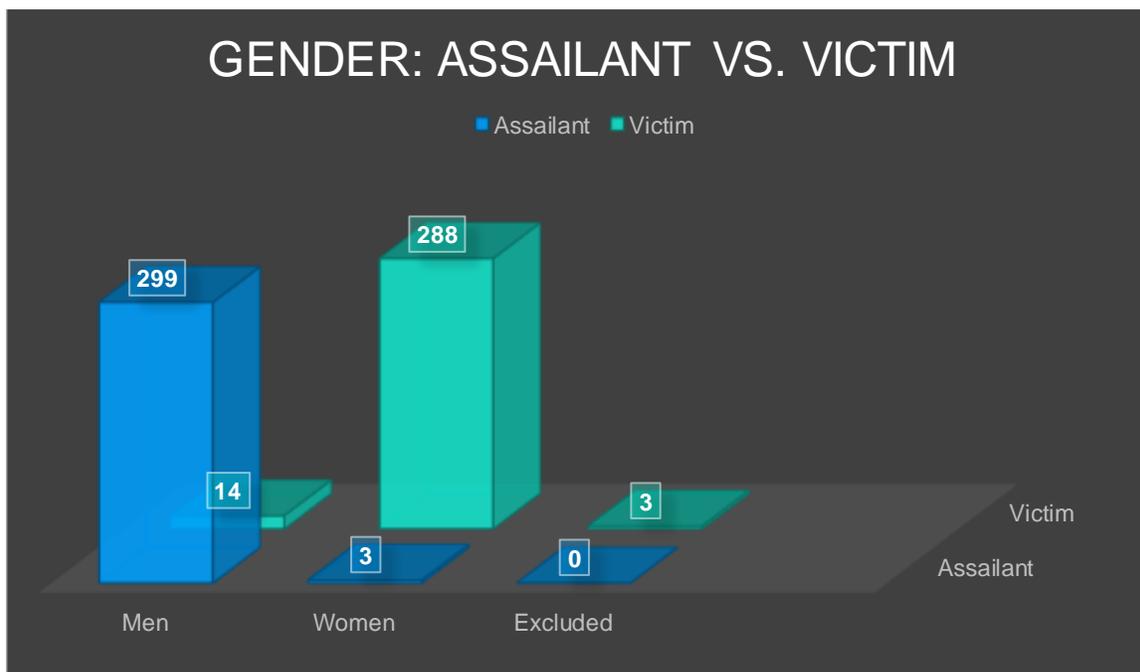
Others saved the association for the body of the article; like when Phillips (2018) reported, “the wave of sexual harassment hit Washington so hard late last year that at one point, three congressmen lost their jobs in a week. Historians said the last time something like that happened, it was over slavery” (para. 6).

From Congress to the music industry to academia and the world of fashion, articles spotlighted these indiscretions. Zeitchik (2018) stated, “The #MeToo moment, which has shined a light on alleged misdeeds by powerful men to account, continues to have ripple effects throughout Hollywood and other industries” (para. 9). It becomes obvious that no industry is immune to these bouts of sexual harassment. Rao (2018) insisted that “much of the conversation surrounding the #MeToo movement has involved Hollywood, but her [Kate Upton’s] account draws attention to sexual misconduct that has been a part of the fashion industry as well” (para. 3).

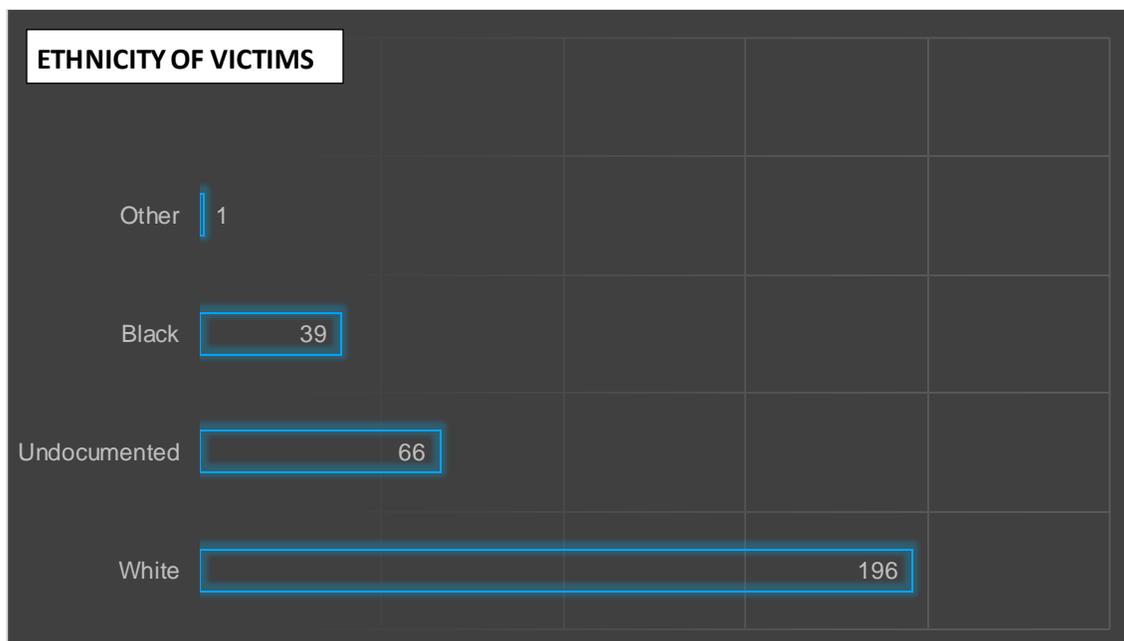


**Figure 2.** *This figure compares the difference of how many articles featured high profile and private citizens.*

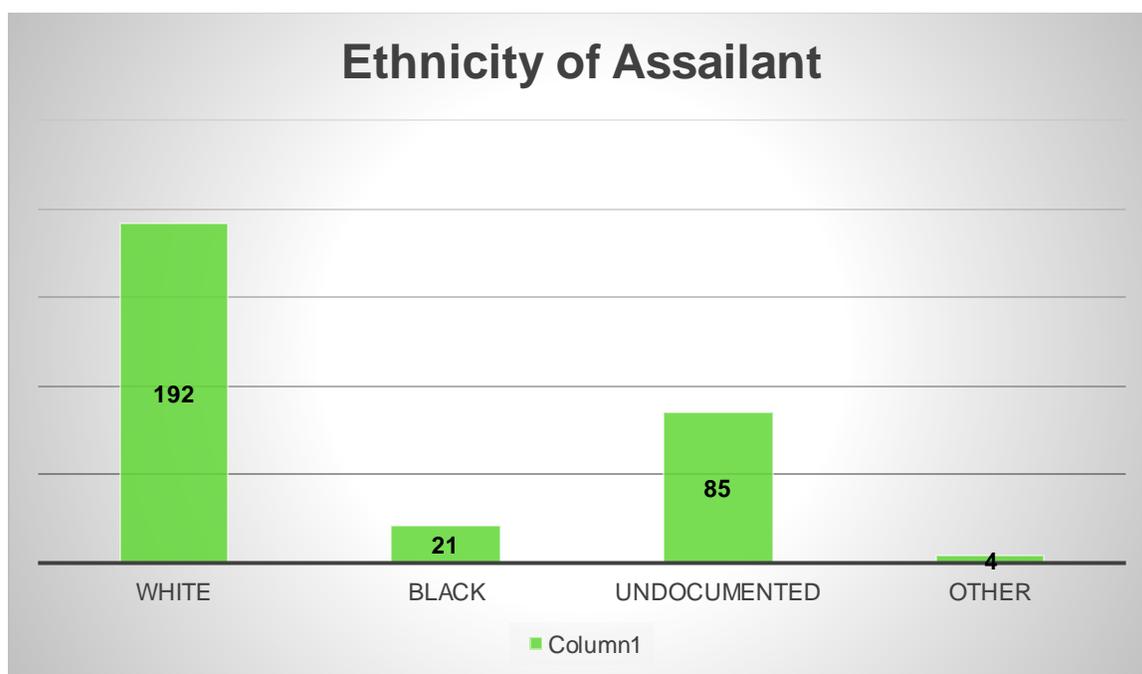
Out of all 127 articles analyzed in this study, 102 featured high-profile cases involving well-known accused assailants and/or victims while only 25 articles recognize private citizens (See Figure 1). Many articles describe the alleged assailants as prominent, prestigious, or well-known. More women journalists (88) have authored these articles than men (59) with 19 articles having more than one author. Men assailants outnumbered women assailants 299 to 3 with zero genders being excluded. Women victims outnumbered men victims 288 to 14 with three victims' genders being excluded (See Figure 2). Within these writings, white victims (196) significantly outnumber Black victims (39), 66 victims' ethnicities are undocumented, and one victim falls into a category of other—being a minority other than Black (See Figure 3). The alleged assailants' ethnicities are as follows: white (192), Black (21), undocumented (85), and other—being a minority other than Black (4) (See Figure 4).



**Figure 3.** This chart recognizes the gender of the victims and their alleged assailants.



**Figure 4.** The above chart lists the ethnicity of the victims.



**Figure 5.** The ethnicity of the assailants is included in this chart.

### ***Framing the Industry***

39 articles (25%) of the collective sample indicate that the #MeToo movement is having an effect on many industries alike and goes on to cover those stories they deem worthy of this

recognition. Barnes (2017) confirmed, “Hollywood is in the middle of a cultural earthquake” (para. 3). These articles seem to recognize that the movement has affected the industry without considering the effect the crime has on the victim. Some only list the basic details of the assault and do not even cover the brunt it had on the victim; and in many cases, victims. This similar language was used to acknowledge another area of impact. Nagourney and Medina (2017) reported that “the groundswell over sexual harassment that has rocked Hollywood moved into California’s capital on Tuesday...” (para. 1). When covering politics in a different state, Hawkins (2018) emphasized that “the sexual harassment scandal that has rocked Kentucky politics for the past two months will sound all too familiar to anyone who has even passively followed the #MeToo movement” (para. 1). Other articles even suggested that politics itself have influenced the movement. Chira (2018) asserted, “Accounts of sexual harassment and assault have toppled man after man in workplace after workplace as the #MeToo movement has taken hold, but quantifying its scope has often proved elusive or politically charged” (para. 1).

### ***Status Features***

The vast majority of these articles cover high profile celebrities, politicians, top executives, etc. This would include Uma Thurman’s reluctant post; as Hauser (2017) reported, “I said I was angry recently, and I have a few reasons, #metoo, in case you couldn’t tell by the look on my face” (para. 5). Thurman was one of the many Harvey Weinstein accusers. 52 articles being 40% mention Weinstein and a number of his victims. Another article does not even name the perpetrator (only referred to as he and a director) and only lists the victims: actresses Reese Witherspoon, Jennifer Lawrence, and Molly Ringwald (Chokshi, 2017, para. 1). Each of those women being well-known, white celebrities.

About 5 percent, six of the articles, featured Bill Cosby and his accusers. Since Cosby was in the midst of the trial for the accusations against him, some #MeToo articles referenced his case. Roig-Franzia (2018) wrote of Cosby's position with the movement:

Cosby occupies a curious place in the annals of America's evolving societal re-evaluation of sex and power. In a sense, he's the grandfather of #MeToo, a famous man buffeted by accusations of sexual misdeeds and rendered incapable of using his power and influence to suppress them – whether they're true or not. But his ultimate place in the history of the movement is still being sorted out. (para. 7).

This particular article lists some of his accusers: Andrea Constand, Eden Tirl, Linda Kirkpatrick, and Lili Bernard. Cosby and those who were victimized by him came to light before the #MeToo post but much of the recognition did not come until later.

Only a few articles written during the Oct. 15, 2017, through April 15, 2018 timeframe covered victims and/or predators in the fashion world. Some of the names include Paul Marciano, Kate Upton, and Miranda Vee. Upton and Vee both accuse Marciano of sexual harassment. With Marciano being the co-founder of Guess and Upton and Vee models, they were evidently vulnerable to his advances. Rao (2018) confirmed, "Upton told Time that models are often told they need to tolerate inappropriate behavior in order to be successful" (para. 12).

The articles written about the reports of assaults within the music industry included Taylor Swift's #MeToo moment. Andrews (2018) noted that "Swift was one of the women featured on the Time magazine's 'Person of the Year' cover, which dubbed her a 'silence breaker' for speaking out about the Mueller incident" (para. 6). Among the accused assailants covered in the music industry was Charlie Walk. Coscarelli (2018) reported, "Mr. Walk had been

known as one of music's most effective promotion executives" (para. 4). Prominent names throughout—some not even needing a title associated with their already famous names.

The Olympics coverage included both victims who were scathed by sexual assaults and their alleged predators. Not only Larry Nassar, the ex-USA Gymnastics doctor, and all of his then 140 plus accusers, but also Shaun White, Olympic snowboarder/gold medalist, were included in these articles. Many of Nassar's victims were medalist as well. McKayla Maroney was just one of those many women. Payne (2017) observed, "Maroney made her accusations earlier this week as part of the #MeToo campaign that appeared on social media in the wake of revelations involving disgraced Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, who allegedly sexually harassed and assaulted a slew of women since at least the 1990s" (para. 5). Lena Zawaideh, a former bandmember in White's rock group, accused White of sexual harassment. Salam (2018) wrote of his interview, "He reiterated how proud he was about winning the gold, expressing regret for his past behavior and added, 'I have grown and changed as a person, as we all grow and change, and am proud of who I am today'" (para. 6).

The political angle was also included in this coverage of the movement. Those would include everyone from lobbyist to state representatives to the presidents themselves—being former presidents George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Donald Trump. As many of those were opinion articles, they were not included in this study. 39 articles did meet the specifications and were used. When yet another accuser came forward about Trump, Berman (2017) asserted that Melinda McGillivray was "asking why Congress has not launched an investigation into the allegations against him" (para. 1). Most of the articles written about Trump include similar questions. Then, there is former president George H.W. Bush. Articles have addressed accounts of him groping women with whom he posed for pictures with. Heather Lind is one of those

women. She was evidently given warnings after the incident; as Phillips (2018) reported, “Lind also said that a security guard later told her that she shouldn’t have stood next to Bush” (para. 9).

There were only 25 articles that featured average, everyday people—those not in the limelight. One was Heather Rothermund an employee of an adult care facility. Some of her account is detailed in an article about how #MeToo is benefiting the finance industry. As reported by Goldstein and Silver-Greenberg (2018), “Accusations of sexual harassment have felled dozens of executives, but in one quiet corner of the financial world, the #MeToo movement looks like a golden opportunity” (para. 1). Another article includes an accusation of a co-pilot, Betty Pina, against the captain with whom she flew with. Kelly Lisenbee, a surgical technician, explains in a *Washington Post* article how the #MeToo movement has help her deal with her own assault. In another *Washington Post* article, Annette Katz, a licensed practical nurse, Jennifer Gunter, an obstetrician-gynecologist, and Kayla Behbahani, chief psychiatry resident at University of Massachusetts Memorial Medical Center, detailed their experiences.

### ***The Missing Minority***

Within these articles white victims outnumbered Black victims 196 to 39 and other people of color are missing altogether. Gabby Douglas was barely acknowledged as a victim in an article that’s emphasis was on her apology to Aly Raisman after chastising her on Twitter about dressing appropriately as to not attract the wrong attention. Bonesteel (2017) noted, “That tweet has since been deleted, but it drew criticism from Simone Biles, Raisman, and Douglas’s 2016 Olympic teammate who said Douglas’s comment ‘doesn’t surprise me’” (para. 5). Douglas was one of the more than 140 victims of Larry Nassar who had come forward at that time. This feature article is more about how a Black woman offended a white woman and not at all about

how the minorities who already face prejudices within the Olympics were victimized by a white superior man.

Just because Black women were scarce in these features does not mean they were not attempting to speak out and be a part of the movement. Maybe they knew they would be met with the same resistance Lupita Nyong faced. In an article titled “Weinstein, Accused by Dozens, Specifically Disputes Nyong’s Harassment Claims,” Wang (2017) wrote that “for unknown reasons, Weinstein issued a more specific statement in response to Nyong’s essay, calling her out by her (first) name and stating – as she had already done in her *New York Times* piece – that she was the one who invited him to New York to see her Broadway show” (para. 10). Of Weinstein’s dozens of accusers, Nyong was the one he chose to publicly refute in such a way. Nyong is also the only Black woman amongst all the white women who were named in the articles and she was only even mentioned in two of them.

In another article, Butler (2017) wrote of Gabrielle Union, a Black actress who was raped at 19-years-old, who discussed her stance on the #MeToo movement:

“I think the floodgates have opened for white women,” the actress told the *New York Times* in an interview published this week. “I don’t think it’s a coincidence whose pain has been taken seriously. Whose pain we have showed historically and continued to show. Whose pain is tolerable and whose pain is intolerable. And whose pain needs to be addressed now.” (para. 2)

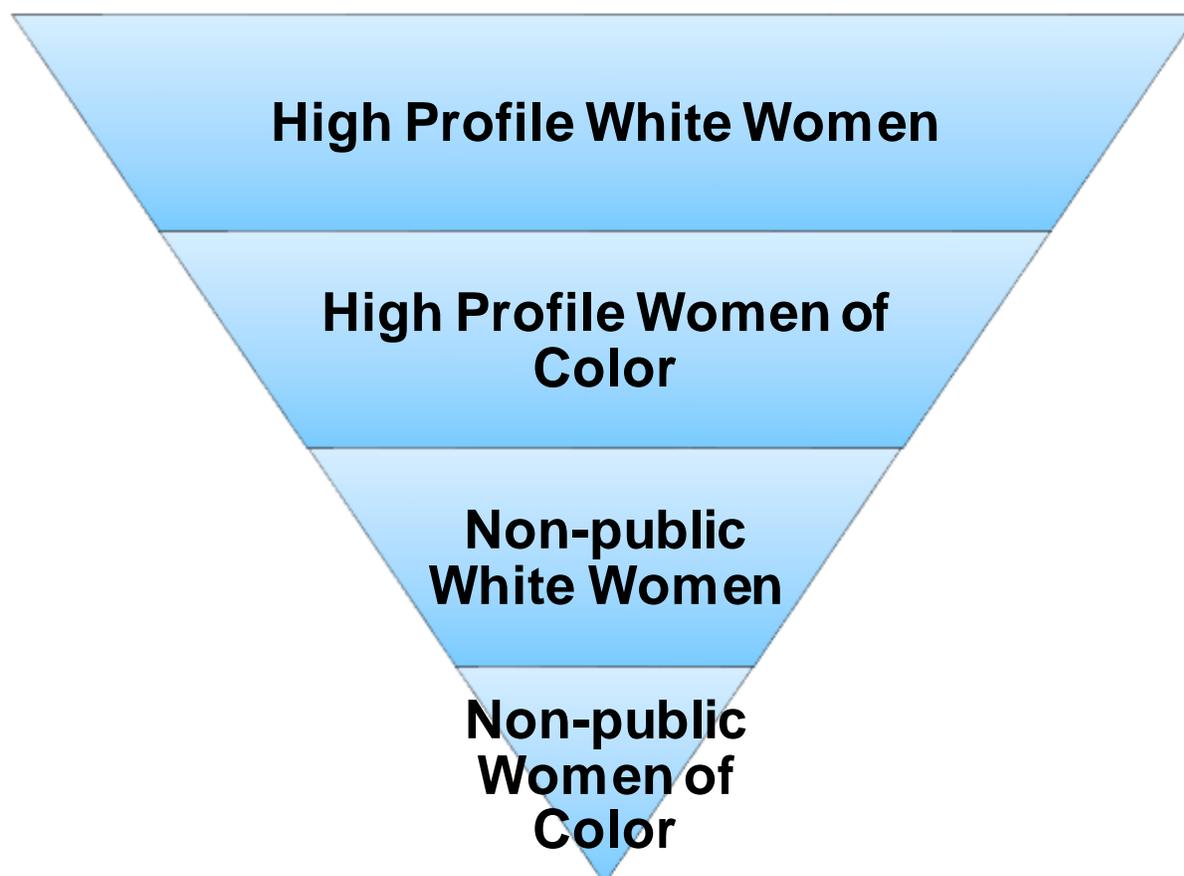
Currie (2020) observed, “Black women’s oppressive experiences are often ill-addressed because anti-misogynist efforts cater to white women—a racially-privileged sub-set of women—while similarly, anti-racist efforts cater to Black men, whose gender confers privilege,” (p. 179). Black women and women of color struggle for recognition while faced with this opposition.

## Discussion

Spiral of silence and framing were the theoretical frameworks used to evaluate media outlets' feature coverage of the #MeToo movement. This thesis found that Black women and women of color—minorities—were less likely to be recognized in these articles. Noelle-Neumann (1974) originally introduced the theory of spiral of silence, while framing was introduced by Goffman (1974). While Burke was the founder of the first Me Too movement in 2006, the cause did not gain national attention until Milano created her own version of the movement. The coverage had tiers in which the men's prestige gained the most recognition, then the women's—most commonly white—importance or stature became the next emphasis within these articles, and lastly, whatever was left by trying to cover the movement at a different angle, possibly those featuring minorities. These findings would be consistent with both the spiral of silence and framing. Spiral of silence explains those who perceive themselves to be in the majority will speak up more willingly than those who do not, and framing establishes who is considered significant enough. Non-public people without a prestigious status will be less likely recognized and thus fall silent because likeness to their representation will not be covered. Also, non-public victims will be less likely to accuse their boss for fear of losing their job—employment they need to support themselves and possibly their families. While movements such as #MeToo are supposed to bring awareness to an injustice, they can in the process overlook and even exclude key elements—for this study, minority groups and women of color.

There was not a united front that included all women. While suppression exists, that will not be possible. Minority groups will be overshadowed, in the background to those who are seen as superior, and their concerns will not be heard and even less understood. Burke, as a Black activist, knew this in the beginning because she would have experienced it before. This study

shows how quickly the movement was ripped out of her hands and into the hands of high-profile white women. Milano fit the profile as did the majority of those who were featured in these articles.



**Figure 6.** *Layers of suppression of the victims affected by the spiral of silence.*

#### ***Assailant versus Victim***

Sexual harassment existed long before the #MeToo movement did. Women are assaulted every day in their places of work, where they live, where they go to school, places they fear, and places they do not. This has not stopped because there is a difference between the assailant and the victim, a significant difference. The majority of assaults involve an assailant who has some type of prestige and/or domination over their victim. Domination and control go hand in hand. While the victim is consumed by fear, the perpetrator is confident in their own reputation,

prominence, social standing and not to forget their gender. Bridges et al. (2020) insisted, “Research on women’s sexual refusal behaviors suggest they do not always refuse unwanted sexual advances because they may feel obligated to be kind and protect men’s egos (to avoid rejecting or humiliating them)” (p. 12). After which, the victim is concerned of the repercussions they will face if they come forward or if anyone will even believe them, and the assailant is aware of their victim’s fear and uses it against them. Nason, Rinehart, Yeater, Newlands, and Crawford (2019) also acknowledged that “given the extent to which the perpetrator-victim relationship has been shown to influence outcomes in sexual assault cases and perceptions of victim responsibility, it is possible that perpetrator-victim relationships might also affect perceptions of the victim’s believability (i.e., the extent to which victim’s report of sexual assault is viewed as veridical)” (p. 320). The assailant has assurance that their powerful stature will keep them from receiving their own chastisement while the victim lacks the initiative they need to confront the situation.

As being white can be linked with having prestige within the existence of social norms, those of color will be more easily exploited. Shapiro and Neuberg (2008) noted that “this sensitivity to the fact that White norms proscribe obvious expressions of prejudice does not preclude, however, a belief that Whites nonetheless discriminate against members of minority groups” (p. 878). That is why those victims’ cause is different and why minority groups struggle to develop a movement for their own specific purpose; however, it is difficult to gain exposure when both the fear of coming forward and the complications of establishing precedence are a consistent deterrent, both of which are related to spiral of silence and framing. They become stuck at the bottom of the spiral where social norms and conformities make it impossible for

them to get the recognition they need to escape the funnel. If there was no support before the assault, it should not be assumed there will be after.

As with the #MeToo movement, it seemed victims gained more recognition if the alleged assailant was a prominent person or if they themselves were a public figure or celebrity already in the limelight. Much of the recognition came through the news coverage of the movement. Framing explains why these features were chosen. While news outlets highlighted the accounts of victims, it seemed to concentrate on similar groups. The likeness pertained to whiteness, prestige, and prominence of them and/or their assailant. Some have suggested that the recognition is related to fame. As observed by Roig-Franzia (2018), “‘We are not celebrities,’ said Lili Bernard, a Los Angeles artist who has accused Cosby of drugging and sexually assaulting her in the 1980s when she played a role on ‘The Cosby Show.’ ‘People are much more interested in knowing what a celebrity suffers than people who are not celebrities’” (para. 15). If the victim has a following, then it will be publicized because their followers desire to know about the troubles they endure. Not that these crimes against celebrities and the likes are unimportant, but they are not the only women who are experiencing them; albeit they are the majority of who were recognized and who became the face of the movement.

While high profile and political men were highlighted in the coverage of these news articles with their names repeated throughout, the victims were commonly introduced by one identifier (i.e. gender or name) and nothing more. Since 39 of the #MeToo articles focus on the stories with a political agenda, prominence seemed to play a significant role in whose stories got told. It becomes more about the abuser, mostly men, and not at all about the victim and their traumatic experience, hardly any connecting the dots between influences such as spiral of silence, dominance, social statures, or minorities being more often victimized with less

opportunities to share their stories. Duncan et al. (2020) wrote that “homogenous networks construct a reality in which individuals do not encounter diverse opinions, but rather hear their own worldview echoed” (p. 193). What are these articles saying about who is important and whose voices need to be heard? Some even included the accused denial with no mention of the trauma it causes to the victim. Many consumers may assume victims are not wanting to speak up, but this movement contradicts that. They want to be heard but only when they are encouraged and feel supported in doing so. While some white women found this encouragement, women of color did not.

This would be true of Gabby Douglas’s #MeToo mention, where even though she was a victim of the same heinous crime, she was the one getting called out in the article for comments she made about modesty and a white woman’s, Aly Raisman, response. Whether Douglas should have posted those comments or not was not the newsworthy topic there, the outlet had an opportunity to feature someone other than the majority but instead they made her the antagonist. The different angle could have portrayed a victim from a group that does not usually get recognized in news coverage; however, it took a victim, Douglas, and barely recognized the real criminal of the real crime, Larry Nassar, that was committed and pinned the blame on Douglas—making it her against Raisman, a white victim. Other than an occasional brief mention, Black women were mostly nonexistent in the coverage. Who gets interviewed or even noticed in the #MeToo articles seemed to be dependent upon theirs or their alleged assailant’s ranking. The way in which the article shifts the story also constructs how the audience perceives it, including who they feel is to blame. Duncan et al. (2020) confirmed, “Homogenous opinion climates may push audiences toward opinion conformity about a news story” (p. 193). When the reporter acknowledges the prominence of the assailant but includes nothing about the victim, it influences

the consumer as they know nothing about the victim but are informed of the attacker's social/economical standing. With swayed coverage, it is more difficult to understand the unnamed, non-public victim over the one being accused: a well-known movie director, a president of a prestigious university, a state representative...

Lupita Nyong'o was met with this type of opposition when she had come forward to accuse Harvey Weinstein. Being the only Black woman who was named in any of the articles as one of Weinstein's accusers and one of those two articles drawing attention to the fact she for "unknown reasons" was the only one he "issued a more specific statement in response to" (Wang, 2017, para. 10). This is an example of the suppression minorities meet when they break their silence and the reason the spiral of silence exists. While Nyong'o was faced by this resistance, white actresses like Uma Thurman were asked and encouraged to tell their stories. Hauser (2017) wrote "asked during a *Times* interview published this month whether she herself had been abused, Ms. Thurman said, 'I'll discuss it when I want to discuss it'" (para. 11). Thurman received support before she even decided to publicly accuse Weinstein.

Just as the article Douglas was featured in was not really about her being a victim and was even titled "Gabby Douglas Apologizes for Criticizing Aly Raisman's Stance on Sexual Assault," Black women did not have the backing celebrities like Thurman had. This article only recognized what "criticism" Raisman faced from Douglas and went into her apology including her tweet which stated "I am WITH you. #metoo" (para. 7). Then, nothing more of Douglas but went more into Raisman being at the forefront of the Nassar accusers. Bonesteel (2017) wrote, "Raisman has become more vocal about sexual abuse since revealing that she had been molested by Larry Nassar..." (para. 8). The article went on to list McKayla Maroney as one of Nassar's other victims. Maroney is also listed as a primary victim in other articles. Payne (2017) described

her as “Maroney, who won a team gold medal as part of the Fierce Five, as well as a silver in the vault at the 2012 Olympics in London” (para. 7). Bonesteel (2017) only recognized Douglas as Raisman’s teammate (para. 1). In a different article, Bonesteel (2017) recognized Maroney as a “former Olympic gold medalist” and “part of the Fierce Five as well as a silver in the vault at the 2012 Games in London” and went on to list her allegations (para. 1 and 2). Also written in an article of Maroney’s accusations, Payne (2017) added that “the campaign, spurred by a tweet by actress Alyssa Milano, invited women to add the hashtag to their social media statuses to demonstrate how widespread the problem of sexual harassment is in all industries, not just Hollywood” (para. 6). White women supporting white women.

### **Suppression of Conformity**

Moreno-Riaño (2002) insisted that “society is seen as an organic whole threatening individuals with exclusion if they do not conform to the majority consensus. Inherent in this is the idea that individuals continually experience a fear of isolation and a need for acceptance from their fellow human beings” (p. 67). The fear of isolation from those who are already excluded can control and hinder the reaction of the victim. The #MeToo movement only added to a preexisting problem. It would seem Burke was correct in her assumption that her cause would be transformed after taken over. This sample of news articles overshadowed Burke’s efforts and very few acknowledged her or other women of color at all.

Neuwirth, Frederick, and Mayo (2007) asserted, “Given the opportunity to express an opinion, people do so by factoring in expectations about likely outcomes based on (a) their past history of interactions (reflected in traits), (b) the fear engendered by the controversy surrounding the issue itself, and (c) more immediate situational factors associated with the particular and unique circumstances of speaking out” (p. 452). The coverage of the #MeToo was

affected and shaped by these factors. Those factors influence and control the outcome. Moreno-Riaño (2002) wrote that “accordingly, individuals are constantly assessing the climate of opinion personally and through the media to maintain a high level of awareness concerning the social consensus” (p. 67). The social consensus of the #MeToo movement was not that women of color mattered. The coverage and articles did not establish that Black women’s accusations were founded. Without prestige and/or fame, victims were unlikely to be mentioned at all with 102 articles being high profile features and only 25 covering everyday/non-public people. The movement’s intentions did not motivate change. Sampert (2010) wrote, “It is interesting that in these stories there is no warning to the perpetrators that the police are stepping up efforts to ensure that they will be caught and prosecuted” (p. 326). The movement only provided a forum for some victims with stories covering the same type of people they were accustomed to writing about, just as perpetrators were still recognized by their social standing.

### **Conclusion**

This thesis evaluated 127 articles in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* that featured victims of sexual assault and referenced the #MeToo movement. Two research questions were examined while doing this: Who was represented in the coverage of the #MeToo movement in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* and, how did *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* frame the #MeToo movement? Spiral of silence and framing was the theoretical framework used while examining these articles.

Through a framing analysis, these articles were observed for who and how the victims were framed by these news outlets. As the #MeToo movement was thrust into the news in 2017, women began to come forward. These outlets chose how they would cover this movement. Both spiral of silence and framing were evident and existed within these articles. In the process of

spotlighting previously ignored, widespread crimes against women, an entire group was not recognized and seldom heard.

News coverage needs to be unbiased in how it reports and who it includes. The observations within this study imply that only certain types of women were considered important within this movement. Those who are already in the limelight should not be the only stories that are told. There are victims who have far more to fear and a lot more to lose, but no one is writing their story or speaking up for them. News outlets should be encouraged to break away from the stereotypes and characterizations that have existed all along.

Within this qualitative research, it was revealed that white, prominent victims and/or accused assailants were the spotlight of these stories. While women as a group are minorities, Black women and women of color were the minority within this coverage. Weinstein and his victims gained much of the recognition and became the face of the movement while minority groups remained to be overlooked. These articles more commonly focused on the prestige while ignoring the consequences of the assaults.

As this was a qualitative study, future research could include a quantitative analysis. Expansion upon this study could add an audience survey/study as well. Since this thesis only involved two national news organizations, another study could include local news coverage.

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