

Between feminist visibility and anti-feminist backlash: exploring the Twitter discussion of the Le Monde “anti-#MeToo” letter

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Abstract: The present study analyses a controversial case study in the #MeToo campaign: the publication of an “anti-#MeToo” letter in Le Monde in January 2018. Through content analysis of a sample of social media posts in the week that followed the publication of the letter, the study explores how users interpret a high-profile instance of backlash against #MeToo at the height of its visibility. This analysis brings to light a number of themes that are useful to understand many tensions between “popular feminism” and “popular misogyny” in current debates on gender politics, including anti-feminist backlash, witch-hunt and moral panic discourses, and women’s and men’s claims to victimhood.

Keywords: #MeToo, feminism, backlash, social media, Twitter

ESP Entre la visibilidad feminista y la reacción antifeminista: explorando el debate de Twitter sobre la carta “anti-#MeToo” de Le Monde

Resumen: El presente estudio analiza un caso controvertido en la campaña de #MeToo: la publicación de una carta “anti-#MeToo” en Le Monde en enero de 2018. A través del análisis de contenido de una muestra de publicaciones en redes sociales durante la semana posterior a la publicación de la carta, el estudio explora cómo los usuarios interpretan un caso destacado de reacción contra #MeToo en el momento de mayor visibilidad del movimiento. Este análisis revela una serie de temas útiles para comprender muchas de las tensiones entre el “feminismo popular” y la “misoginia popular” en los debates actuales sobre políticas de género, incluyendo la reacción antifeminista, los discursos de caza de brujas y pánico moral, y las reivindicaciones de victimización tanto de mujeres como de hombres.

Palabras clave: #MeToo, feminismo, contrarreacción, redes sociales, Twitter

1. Introduction

A key feature of contemporary gender politics is the renewed visibility of feminist activism in the current media landscape, on the one hand, and of anti-feminist backlash on the other. This dynamic has been described by Banet-Weiser (2018) as a tension between “popular feminism” and “popular misogyny”. Popular feminism refers to a revival of feminist ideas and activism that is especially “tied to media visibility, circulation, and affective embrace” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p. 4), particularly on social media platforms. In contrast, popular misogyny refers both to the “social, political, economic, and cultural structure” of patriarchal societies (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 17) and to the more recent “reaction to the culture-wide circulation and embrace of feminism” (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 3). Popular misogyny can be understood as part of a wider trend of the revitalization of populist and conservative politics across Western countries,

which has invigorated sexist ideas and policies in mainstream society (Rottenberg, 2019). The revival of feminist protests since the 2010s can thus also be understood as a backlash against this institutional legitimization of conservative views on gender.

The #MeToo campaign represents an essential case study to understand this context of revived feminist activism and backlash in media discourses. Starting in 2017 after the publication of investigations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, “the long #MeToo moment” has corresponded to an “explosion of discourse and activism around sexual and gender-based violence over the past decade” (Boyle, 2024, p. 2). The participation of social media users in #MeToo has been described as “nothing short of phenomenal” and represented a “moment of reckoning” for sexual violence activism (Fileborn and Loney-Howes, 2019, p. 3). In the years that followed, it has been observed how #MeToo contributed to a

“transformation in mainstream common sense” in public discourse around sexual violence (Rottenberg, 2019, p. 47; Bernardini, 2021).

At the same time, recent years have also been characterized by intense anti-feminist discourses and policies, such as the popularization of men's rights and anti-“political correctness” discourses (Corredor, 2019; Nicholas and Agius 2017). This is especially noticeable on social media platforms, in what has been identified as “networked misogyny”, “a basic anti-female violent expression that circulates to wide audiences on popular media platforms” (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2015, p. 172).

Thus, the #MeToo shift did not occur in a linear fashion, nor did it happen without a significant amount of backlash. Rather, #MeToo represented “a moment of rupture in which definitions of sexual violence are simultaneously opened up and pulled back toward more conservative understandings” (Fileborn and Phillips, 2019, p. 100). Much of the public discussion on #MeToo has focused on a central axis of tension: whether the movement has gone “too far” or “not far enough” (Boyle, 2024; Bernardini, 2025). The struggle over the boundaries, meaning and reach of #MeToo can therefore be read as part of a wider cultural struggle in contemporary gender politics between popular feminism and popular misogyny.

The present study aims to analyse public responses and backlash to #MeToo by examining a specific case study in the European digital public sphere: the Twitter discussion that followed an “anti-#MeToo” public letter published in *Le Monde* in 2018. By analysing a sample of tweets in the week that followed the publication of the letter, the present study aims to explore how users interpret a high-profile instance of backlash against #MeToo at the height of its visibility. This analysis brings to light a number of themes that are useful to understand many tensions in current debates on gender politics, including anti-feminist backlash, witch-hunt and moral panic discourses, and women's and men's claims to victimhood.

2. Case study: Le Monde letter

The case analysed is an open letter published in *Le Monde* on 9 January 2018, with the headline “«*Nous défendons une liberté d'importuner, indispensable à la liberté sexuelle*»” (Chiche et al., 2018). The letter was co-written by five French women¹ and signed by over 100 women, mostly creative professionals, including art critic and author Catherine Millet, who in her memoir detailed her experiences with group sex and anonymous encounters, challenging norms around female sexuality (Thurman, 2022), and revealed actress Catherine Deneuve. As the most internationally prominent signatory, the letter became most closely associated with Deneuve in media coverage, where she was often portrayed as the primary creator and spokeswoman for the initiative.

The main message of the letter is that #MeToo has gone too far and “led to a climate of totalitarian society”. According to the authors, while the Harvey Weinstein accusations triggered “a legitimate awakening about the sexual violence that women

are subjected to”, the campaign quickly degenerated into an attack on men, women, and sexual freedom. They contend that #MeToo is animated by a “hatred of men” and that it unfairly targets them for harmless sexual acts. Additionally, it relies on puritan morals that reduce women to the “status of eternal victim” and “to defenseless preys of male chauvinist demons”. As the headline sums up, they call for greater individual empowerment in sexual relations, since “the freedom to say ‘no’ to a sexual proposition cannot exist without the freedom to bother”. At the same time, this view of sexual relations between women and men has been read as conservative, “located in the heteronormative gender binary that connects the two sex/gender identities through heterosexual desire, in which women's role in society is reduced to that of a passive object of seduction” (Hajek, 2018, p. 141). The letter can be placed as a part of a wider cultural discussion on the acceptability of high-profile men's predatory behaviour, which predates the 2017 #MeToo hashtag but that has recently been recognized as “the long #MeToo moment” (Boyle, 2024). In France, this is exemplified by public discussions of director Roman Polanski, who in 1977 pleaded guilty of drugging and raping a 13-year-old girl. His arrest in 2009 generated controversy in the following years in France and in the U.S., with many political and film personalities either condemning Polanski or defending him, especially on the basis of his artistic merits (Marghitu, 2018).

The *Le Monde* letter represents one of the most clearly articulated and publicised examples of backlash against #MeToo. It was widely disseminated by news outlets. In the context of shifting cultural discourses about sexual violence, the letter can be understood as a fundamentally conservative action aimed at undoing the social transformation brought about by #MeToo. By January 2018, it was clear that #MeToo had generated some kind of cultural shift, and the authors aim to push back against what they perceive to be a new cultural climate. The letter can thus be framed as an instance of a typical narrative of “reactionary feminist politics” that claims that bourgeois feminists are the real victims, and which is often amplified in high-profile media outlets (Phillips, 2021). Following criticisms of the letter in the days after its publication, Deneuve issued an apology to survivors of sexual assault who might have been offended, but otherwise re-stated her support for the initiative (Deneuve, 2018).

The letter also drew highly polarised responses from social media users. The present study thus aims to analyze the international reactions to the *Le Monde* letter on the platform Twitter (now known as X).

3. Methodology

This article examines a sample of posts in the Twitter conversation following the publication of the letter in *Le Monde* in 9-15 January 2018. Twitter was selected as the research platform because it serves as a widely recognized public forum. The predominantly public nature of posts and interactions encourages users to engage with issues of collective interest.

¹ Sarah Chiche (writer/psychoanalyst), Catherine Millet (author/art critic), Catherine Robbe-Grillet (actress/writer), Peggy Sastre (author/journalist) and Abnousse Shalmani (writer/journalist).

Twitter has long been regarded as a leading social networking site for conversations on social and political matters, blending news, entertainment, political discourse, and personal communication (Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira, 2012; Lameiras, 2019). Previous research has highlighted the growing polarization of online discourses on gender and sexuality, underscoring the importance of examining these discourses within the context of digital platforms (Arce-García & Menéndez-Menéndez, 2023). Therefore, Twitter was deemed the most appropriate platform for this study to explore the political, social, and cultural dimensions of the #MeToo discourse. Research often focuses on Twitter due to its predominantly public data and text-based content (Giglietto et al., 2012; see also Bruns, 2018, for limitations).

The analysis draws from a broader dataset provided by the 'Minerva' project, which was supported by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies and the Economia Civile association (see Zacchia et al., 2019). Researchers used a Python-based API to collect over 2 million public tweets posted between October 2017 and April 2018 containing the #MeToo hashtag. A subset of tweets from this dataset was selected for the present study. An initial sample of tweets was extracted containing the following key words: "Deneuve", "French", "Monde". The sample was limited to the week following the publication of the letter, from 9 to 15 January 2018. Additionally, all tweets written in French from that time period were extracted, since it was assumed that the majority of these posts would be focused on the Le Monde letter. Overall, the initial sample was 13,226 tweets. To obtain a smaller sample that was manageable for close reading, a random sample of 14% tweets was extracted. The final sample analyzed in this paper thus consists of 1,434 tweets. Reflecting the international reach of the discussion, a variety of languages is present in the dataset. The majority of tweets (65%) are in English, while 18% are in French. Other significant languages include Spanish (7.5%), German (4.6%), Dutch (2.6%) and Italian (2.2%). The focus of this paper is thus on the international social media debate; Pavard et al. (2020) provide an analysis of #MeToo in the French national context.

Following the ethical guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (Franzke et al., 2020), only public tweets are analyzed, and usernames are anonymized. This consideration was particularly important given the sensitive subject matter and the expectation that users might share personal experiences of sexual violence (Mukherjee, 2017). Tweets in languages other than English were translated by the author.

Tweets were analysed using thematic analysis, defined as "a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 9). The goal of thematic analysis is to highlight "the most salient constellations of meanings present in the dataset" including "affective, cognitive and symbolic dimensions" (Joffe, 2012, p. 209). This approach is especially useful to understand the process of social construction of a certain issue by given population: in this case, how Twitter users understand #MeToo and its backlash. The Twitter sample was read repeatedly to identify initial codes, which were annotated with the aid of Dedoose

software (2018). The analysis generated 27 codes, which were then organised into overarching themes. To address the research aim of exploring users' interpretations and debates surrounding the Le Monde letter, three main themes are identified and presented in the next sections: discussions on the definition of sexual violence and of #MeToo, criticisms of #MeToo, and understandings of #MeToo as a generational and national divide.

This research has notable limitations. Since the dataset includes only tweets with the #MeToo hashtag, discussions of the letter without the hashtag are excluded, a common issue in "hashtag studies" (Bruns, 2020). While the letter directly responded to #MeToo and likely prompted many users to include the hashtag, some relevant tweets are inevitably omitted. However, given the study's focus on the letter's connection to #MeToo, analyzing hashtagged tweets is appropriate. Additionally, social media anonymity often results in fragmented or unverifiable user information, including traditional social research variables such as gender or age. Consequently, the study emphasizes tweet content rather than the identity of their authors.

4. Defining sexual violence, defining #MeToo

One of the key points made in the letter is the importance of setting clear boundaries regarding sexual violence. The letter begins with the assertion: "Rape is a crime. But trying to pick up someone, however persistently or clumsily, is not – nor is gallantry an attack of machismo" (Chiche et al., 2018). By aiming to challenge the #MeToo discourse, the authors reaffirm a binary understanding of sexual violence, delineating a clear distinction between rape and what they perceive as harmless flirting. This perspective proves especially contentious in Twitter discussions. Some users express support for the letter's distinction, emphasizing the importance of separating rape from other forms of sexual interaction:

Support for Catherine Deneuve because trying to pick someone up is not assault. In this publication, rape is denounced as a crime. There is a kind of feminism that can become ridiculous (see inclusive writing). Our society is Americanising. Danger. #MeToo #BalanceTonPorc (10 January; translated from French)

Other users express confusion regarding the idea put forward in the letter, which suggests that #MeToo is calling for a blurring of the definition of sexual violence. They argue that it is the authors of the letter who are responsible for blurring these boundaries, as they are misrepresenting the core intent of #MeToo:

The authors of the Le Monde letter explain that we should not forbid sexual advances... but when did the #BalanceTonPorc, #MeToo and/or #TimesUp try to forbid flirting or to abolish freedom? These women mix everything up. #CaVous (10 January; translated from French)

Have men been forced out of jobs for touching a knee or for trying to steal a kiss due to #me-too, #BalanceTonPorc ? Curious. And come

on, Deneuve, those flirtations are problematic in the workplace. #TimesUp [...] (10 January)

Most notably, users propose their own definitions of sexual violence, seeking clear criteria to determine what constitutes sexual violence and problematic behaviour. Some point to power dynamics as the central defining element of sexual violence, challenging the dynamics omitted in the letter's arguments. These users draw on the classic feminist framework of rape as a matter of violence and domination rather than sexuality (Brownmiller, 1975). In this way, they underscore the critical role of power dynamics in shaping the concept of consent within sexual behaviour:

Catherine Deneuve, Rape is not about sexuality, but about power and domination. A woman should be able to rebuff a man without reprisal. That's not puritanical, it's humanity. You're simplifying a complex subject. #MeToo[,] A Woman (10 January)

Flirting is a two-sided game. Harassment is not. Specially when you have two people in very unequal positions of power. That is what #MeToo is about. Not some amateur, clumsy, innocent high school drama. #CatherineDeneuve (11 January)

In a similar vein, some users also challenge the letter's claim that #MeToo represents an attack on sexual freedom. They conceptualise sexual freedom as rooted in equal gender relations and meaningful consent. In their view, the #MeToo movement's fight against sexual violence and harassment also serves to foster a more sexually free and egalitarian society:

Whoever fights to end sexual harassment is not fighting against, but FOR sexual freedom. Where women constantly fear for their physical and physical integrity, there can be no sexual freedom. #deneuve #metoo (15 January; translated from German)

The #metoo movement does not repress sexual expression, #CatherineDeneuve. They allow women and men to have a place to speak out. Sexual freedom exists as long as it is between two consenting adults. When there is a power structure in the workplace there cannot be true consent. (10 January)

Another strategy that users adopt to counter the arguments presented in the letter is by invoking their personal experiences with sexual harassment. They follow the #MeToo initiative of sharing their stories to illustrate how, based on their subjective perceptions, certain behaviours should be classified as harassment. In this way, they challenge top-down definitions of violence and rely on their own understanding to assert the legitimacy of their experiences:

Wow, this is just insane. I'm French and support the #meToo movement. There's a serious difference between clumsy flirting and harassment! I'm shocked that women could actually say that. I've suffered from unrequired

insistent flirting and trust me, I felt harassed. Shame on you! (10 January)

#CatherineDeneuve I grew up in Paris. As teens, my friends and I were harassed and molested in public, constantly. No adults believed us. It was not flirtation, it was not sexy. It was scary and humiliating. It needs to end. #BalanceTonPorc (10 January)

In a similar way, some users also stress the importance of listening to the experiences of other survivors to define sexual violence. They oppose the content of the letter, arguing that it constructs a selective interpretation of #MeToo while disregarding the narratives shared by survivors; this omission is perceived as offensive and tone-deaf:

Shame on Le Monde for publishing this ridiculous letter by 100 reactionary idiots who don't listen to victims. The #BalanceTonPorc movement perfectly differentiates between pick up and assault. It is a global movement to help assaulted women and to LISTEN TO THEM (10 January; translated from French)

Catherine Deneuve and 99 co-signatories advocate the 'Freedom to molest (or to be molested)'. A resounding slap in the face for the many women who have been molested, abused and raped. No, Ms. Deneuve, you are on the wrong track. #MeToo (10 January; translated from German)

One of the main criticisms leveled against the authors of the letter is that they speak from a position of privilege, which renders them unable to fully grasp the power dynamics at play in cases of sexual violence:

Not all woman have the financial freedom Ms. Deneuve and "We're All That Boys!"² women have to fight back. As a matter of fact, VERY FEW DO. For a single mom, if its between feeding children and demanding dignity, children win every time. (13 January)

One point in the letter that attracts particular criticism is the suggestion that a woman might not "feel forever traumatized by a man who rubs himself against her in the subway, even if that is regarded as an offense," and that she might "consider this act as the expression of a great sexual deprivation, or even as a non-event" (Chiche et al., 2018). This statement is interpreted by some users as exemplifying the authors' oblivious privilege, as they describe an everyday situation that, users argue, they are likely unfamiliar with due to their celebrity lifestyle. As a result, their opinions on the subject are deemed insignificant and ill-advised, as they lack the familiarity or authority to comment on the experiences faced by "regular" women:

Madame Deneuve is reclaiming the right to be bothered... We are talking about this bourgeois who is escorted by bodyguards and who has definitely not set foot in the metro in 100 years!

² Reference is unclear.

#balancetonporc (10 January; translated from French)

[...] Clearly, the authors of the Le Monde letter have never taken the night bus at 1 in the morning or struggled to get rid of a persistent man in a long time... #Balancetonporc (10 January; translated from French)

This point is particularly interesting because one of the most frequent criticisms directed at the #MeToo movement is that it prioritises the voices of famous, privileged women (Phipps, 2019). Here, however, #MeToo is generally understood as advocating for the best interests of ordinary women, contrasting with the perceived detachment and cluelessness of the French authors. As a result, users criticise the authors of the letter for perpetuating misogyny and undermining women's rights, while expressing their support for #MeToo:

No surprise coming from that privileged group of misogynist women. Of course they published w/Le Monde. Take a hike, ladies. Not interested in your guilt tripping and shushing. I'm standing with #MeToo and #TIMESUP despite their flaws, women will get better mileage w/ them than w/out. (9 January)

White French women of high social status are giving lectures on seduction vs. harassment. This is what I see here. A letter which, in the name of sexual freedom, legitimises cultural and racial supremacy #MeToo #Deneuve (10 January; translated from Spanish)

Another element of the letter that is taken to symbolise the authors' privilege is the mention of the protests that took place in October 2017 against a Roman Polanski retrospective at the Cinéma-thèque Française. In the letter, these protests are cited as part of a "purging wave" against male artists; additionally, Catherine Deneuve had previously expressed her support for Polanski. From the perspective of some users, defending Polanski signals the authors' lack of understanding of sexual assault, revealing the letter's confused definition of the varying degrees of sexual violence. They also reiterate the authors' inability to prioritise the rights of women over their celebrity privilege:

Catherine Deneuve supports male privilege to such an extreme degree she defended Roman Polanski's right to rape kids and get away with it. So of course she's going to disagree with #metoo (10 January)

Ironic. Defending ROMAN POLANSKI in the same open letter that reduces the #MeToo movement down to "stolen kisses" and "sexually charged text messages" is exactly why #MeToo exists. #CatherineDeneuve (11 January)

As a result, some users express support for the #MeToo movement, which they believe has been misrepresented in the letter. They provide their own definition of the scope of #MeToo, aiming to present

it as a reasonable and legitimate movement, in contrast to the view expressed in the letter:

reads NYT article by Catherine Deneuve To all the women who signed this petition, Do some research before you attach yourself to this stupidity. #MeToo has nothing to do with flirting. It's about sexual harassment, abuse, and rape. (10 January)

The #metoo movement does not repress sexual expression, #CatherineDeneuve. They allow women and men to have a place to speak out. Sexual freedom exists as long as it is between two consenting adults. When there is a power structure in the workplace there cannot be true consent. (10 January)

5. Criticising #MeToo

In the letter, some of the most widespread criticisms of #MeToo are articulated, such as the idea that a legitimate movement has turned into a "witch-hunt" and that it has been weaponised by angry women acting irrationally. As a result, the letter resonates with certain users who share the French women's concerns about the "new" ideas #MeToo has brought forward:

Catherine Deneuve is being praised on foreign websites like the DailyMail, with thousands of comments applauding this letter and the #MeToo or #BalanceTonPorc frenzy and hateful feminism. #cdanslair (10 January; translated from French)

French women have taken a slightly different stance/approach on #metoo and it's worth sharing. Rape is a crime, but trying to seduce someone, even persistently or cack-handedly, is not -- nor is being gentlemanly a macho attack. We do need clearer lines. (11 January)

Some users feel that the Le Monde letter is bringing much-needed nuance into the #MeToo debate. They believe the conversation has taken on an extremist tone, and the letter is seen as counteracting this with more moderate, "common-sense" opinions:

What if #BalanceTonPorc and the letter signed by Deneuve are not fundamentally incompatible[?] Why should they be opposed? There are certainly two realities, can we admit it? (I am posing the question like this, since I am not a woman...) (10 January; translated from French)

I see the point. If #metoo was a gauge needle on a dashboard, 0 could be everyone ignoring the problem. That's rectified. 100 would be viewing a hello or a query as sexual harassment. That's not made clear. Deneuve and the French artists have recalibrated the needle midway. (10 January)

In an interesting contrast, some users praise the bravery of the signatories for speaking out in the letter. In their view, #MeToo is seen as representing the dominant paradigm of political correctness that is prevalent in society, and the signatories of the letter

are viewed as lone voices who go against the tide by voicing unpopular opinions:

Finally some voices that are speaking out and refusing to run with the pack. Catherine Deneuve, Catherine Millet and the 99 signatories of the Le Monde letter are rightfully denouncing the libel, the lynching, the willful harm and puritanism of #balancetonporc (9 January; translated from French)

There, they have started crying because Deneuve does not want to bend to the hegemonic discourse of #metoo (11 January; translated from Spanish)

Supporters of the letter argue that the text articulates some of the most widespread criticisms of #MeToo as a movement. Many users believe that #MeToo embodies a form of feminism that has gone too far and is unjustly targeting all men. This is evident, for example, in the association of #MeToo with the term “feminazi”:

So a woman with common sense that states the obvious like innocent until proven guilty and flirting is not rape is being eviscerated by the feminazis. Who saw that coming? #CatherineDeneuve #MeToo (11 January)

There are real victims of sexual harassments, but the #MeToo crowds are hijacking the momentum to expand Feminazism. This is no more about harassment. It's about emasculating the male species. I agree with Ms. Deneuve completely. (10 January)

Similarly, words like “hysteria” and “lynching” are used to describe #MeToo and the women who speak out through the movement:

finally, someone has started to end the #MeToo hysteria nonsense... thanks to #CatherineDeneuve for putting things in proper perspective [attached: link to a news article titled “Catherine Deneuve Signs Open Letter Denouncing ‘Me Too’ Movement as ‘Witch-Hunt’” on the Rolling Stone website] (11 January)

French woman absolutely spot on. Many men have been wrongly victimized and banged in prison by lying, dishonest, deranged women stirred up by d inane, hysterical #MeToo campaign (11 January)

In a few instances, this discourse is appropriated by nationalist and anti-Islamic commentators. The original letter makes a brief reference to “religious extremists,” who are grouped with “enemies of sexual freedom” and “reactionaries” (Chiche et al., 2018). While users do not explicitly quote this passage, some view #MeToo as part of a broader trend of foreign influences that are detrimental to French culture. The “excessive” feminism of #MeToo and #balancetonporc is likened to Islam as a religion that restricts women's freedom and harms French values:

The #balancetonporc extremists must realise that they are validating the ideas of the worst Islamists by putting women under a burka to protect them from men who are all libidinous pigs (9 January; translated from French)

Voices such as Alain Delon's, Catherine Deneuve's, Letitia Casta's and others must continue to speak out to fight against the disintegrating government of Macron and his clique who are killing our beautiful France. (13 January; translated from French)

One of the points in the letter that most resonates with users is the idea that #MeToo has turned into a war against all men; the letter repeatedly states how men are now being unjustly targeted for harmless behaviour:

In fact, #MeToo has led to a campaign, in the press and on social media, of public accusations and indictments against individuals who, without being given a chance to respond or defend themselves, are put in the exact same category as sex offenders. This summary justice has already had its victims: men who've been disciplined in the workplace, forced to resign, and so on, when their only crime was to touch a woman's knee, try to steal a kiss, talk about “intimate” things during a work meal, or send sexually-charged messages to women who did not return their interest. (Chiche et al., 2018)

On this point, users feel that the #MeToo movement has given women a sudden and excessive power which they are wielding to attack men. As a result, men are often portrayed as the “real victims” and those who are suffering the most from this recent empowerment of women. The concept of “himpathy” (Manne, 2018) is useful to understand how these discourses aim to prioritise the defence of men:

Well done Catherine Deneuve. We must tell men – who are treated very badly at the moment – that we love them, whether they are awkward, seducers or machos. Against #MeTooWhatNext #metoo movement (9 January; translated from French)

Thank you Catherine Deneuve for giving a media audience to the male cause! Because all men are far from being all pigs and because bitches exist too #balancetatruie³ #balancetonporc (11 January; translated from French)

Some users take this argument further by claiming that the women who participate in #MeToo do not actually have any experience of “legitimate” sexual assault – a point which does not appear in the original letter. According to these users, these women are opportunists who have used their sexuality to their own advantage, and thus have no right to participate in #MeToo:

Debate: I support this letter because I've always been against the hashtag #Balance-

³ “Expose your sow”.

TonPorc because there has been more revenge by little whores than real sexual harassment. So well done to Catherine, Brigitte etc. (10 January; translated from French)

#CatherineDeneuve and her friends are so right about #MeToo A witchhunt started by a bunch of hypocrites who could have kept their pride and say NO(assault and rape are still a crime) but instead chose to f*ck their way to fame and fortune. (9 January)

6. #MeToo as a generational and national divide

The controversy generated by the letter and the heated public debate that followed are often interpreted by referring to two broad categories of overlapping explanations: as a generational conflict and as an issue of French national culture.

Users frame the polarisation of the debate as a generational divide. Some users are open-minded in trying to understand this contrast as a difference in values between an older generation of feminists, represented by the authors of the letter, and the younger #MeToo activists. In this sense, users acknowledge that #MeToo has brought on a new mentality that contrasts with the views of older generations:

I thought Catherine Deneuve's criticisms of #MeToo were cultural, but given this Atlantic piece, I'm more inclined to see it as a generational schism. (15 January)

Interesting attempt to see into generational differences on the French women rejecting #MeToo: "I wonder if those of us who were born later, who are fighting other battles, often underestimate the primacy of sexual liberation in the world view of previous generations. (11 January)

It is noticeable that Deneuve, the most prominent woman among the signatories, was 74 at the time of publication; however, the five authors of the letter were of varying ages, ranging from late 30s to 80s. The generational conflict is therefore at least in part a cultural construction that stems from how users perceive the values espoused in the letter and those of #MeToo activists. Indeed, some users map the generational conflict onto the other types of conflict that were previously described; most notably, some users see the letter as an expression of the privilege of an older generation, who take on a condescending tone while being oblivious to the real problems women face:

Respect to Miss Deneuve, but she's clearly living in a different, a much privileged bubble of her own. She and those women have completely missed the point of #MeToo She is, clearly a figure stuck in the beliefs of the French New Wave. (11 January)

Women like Catherine Deneuve are the type of white women my grandmother side-eyed in the movement because they always centered their white privilege above gender inequity

which made them a threat to liberation. Talk about it. #TIMESUP #MeToo (10 January)

A group of around 30 feminists, led by politician Caroline De Haas, published a counter-letter where they compare the signatories of the Le Monde letter to "the annoying colleague or the tiresome uncle who doesn't understand what's happening" (Collins, 2018). This comment was widely picked up by the media and is quoted often in the Twitter sample. Some users even adopt ageist language against Deneuve and the other signatories to undermine their views:

Deneuve is a senile old goat who no longer gets laid: she only wishes men would still hit on her like in her glorious past. Being a wealthy AF⁴, white celebrity has her disconnected from reality. She and her cronies are no accurate representation of France. #MeToo #BalanceTonPorc (11 January)

Sad to see how the ageing actress #CatherineDeneuve, with her face cracking up, is seeking publicity at any cost by equalising #rape and #sexualharassment with #flirt. Loss of memory? #MeeToo #BalanceTonPorc [attached: two photos of Deneuve side by side, one from her youth and one from the present day] (10 January).

In contrast, those who support the letter do so precisely because they feel that #MeToo has brought about a new mentality that they deem excessive. They share the letter's call for a return to a previous generation of common-sense attitudes toward harassment and violence:

Thank you to second-wave feminists for crushing third-wave feminists. #MeToo and #BalanceTonPorc do nothing for victims. Let's not put on the same level rubbing in the metro (certainly intolerable) and rape. Thank you Catherine Deneuve and the others. (10 January; translated from French)

Another line of interpretation for the polarisation of arguments has to do with the fact that the authors of the letter are French; the message of the letter is therefore often interpreted, both by users and in the media, as stemming from specific French cultural characteristics. Both those who support and those who oppose the letter argue that their position somehow stems from a French cultural specificity. Opponents see France as a country where misogyny is rampant, and the letter as an expression of this misogyny:

[...] Catherine Deneuve is SO OLD! And misogyny in France is well known. ALL women should support other women instead of putting them down and keep objectifying themselves. #metoo #wakeup (10 January)

Condemnation of #metoo campaign by the 10 french actresses is a betrayal of women of France who are constantly fighting the inhe-

⁴ "as fuck".

rent sexism known to be widespread in French society. Badly done ladies (10 January)

Conversely, supporters of the letter believe that #MeToo goes against French cultural values and thus see the letter as defending French society. France is associated with stereotypes about romance and seduction, whilst #MeToo is seen as imposing foreign American values:

Stop to the absurd feminism defended by women who are as feminine as Dockers⁵. France is the country of love, seduction, flirting. Catherine Deneuve embodies this France, Catherine Millet has been able to describe it #BalanceTonPorc #metoo #BalanceTaTruie #TribuneDuMonde (10 January; translated from French)

Why is it obvious to French women that the #MeToo movement is about getting women to push away the men in their lives and act like they're empowering themselves by destroying everything, but not American women? (11 January)

7. Discussion

The present study has analysed public responses on Twitter following the publication of an “anti-#MeToo” letter at a highly visible moment in the #MeToo campaign. The analysis reveals the tensions and conflicts that permeate public discourse on sexual violence and feminism. Some thematic axes in the online discussion can be identified that offer meaningful insights into the dynamic between popular feminism and popular misogyny within #MeToo.

The letter represents a conservative effort against #MeToo, seeking to reaffirm “the pre-existing normative boundaries of sexual violence” (Fileborn and Phillips, 2019, p. 107). The backlash against #MeToo that emerges from the Twitter samples often takes the form of anti-feminist discourse, “invoking feminist overreach, hysteria, and irrationality” (Fileborn and Phillips 2019, p. 102). In the sample, the #MeToo movement is often compared to a witch-hunt or is more generally perceived as a moral panic. Anti-feminist backlash therefore emerges as an important feature of the public’s understanding of #MeToo, which is perceived as excessive and exaggerating the seriousness of sexual harassment. This discourse constitutes the core argument of the French letter and is shown to be shared by many supporters of the initiative, demonstrating the continuing resonance of moral panic and witch hunt themes in current cultural discourses (Phillips and Chagnon, 2021).

Public perceptions of victims and victimhood are also key to understanding the findings in this #MeToo case study. Discourses on victimhood are central to the Le Monde letter, which argued that #MeToo aims to “enslave [women] to a status of eternal victim and reduce them to defenseless preys of male chauvinist demons” (Chiche et al. 2018). The authors argue that, by expanding the definition of sexual violence, #MeToo is also extending claims of victimisation to a wider range of women. This becomes a contentious

point among supporters and detractors of the letter in the Twitter sample. Public discussions of sexual violence often entail the use of neoliberal discourse that prizes individual responsibility and criticises victimhood (Worthington, 2020). This reflects a wider concern with a “culture of victimhood” that began in the early 1990s, where claims of victimisation by marginalised groups, such as women, ethnic minorities or disabled people, constitute an expression of weakness, dependency and lack of personal responsibility (Cole, 2006). Such discourses are also present in the Twitter sample, refuting women’s claims to legitimate victimhood and instead recasting them as attention seeking and attempting to discredit men. Thus, victimhood discourses can be interpreted as a renewed backlash against the current visibility of feminism and anti-sexual violence activism.

Such discourses also reflect the increasing mainstreaming of alt-right ideas and the re-positioning of feminism and progressive politics as intolerant and oppressive (Phipps, 2019). For example, the infiltration of alt-right language can be observed in the sample of tweets, with a vocal minority of users employing derogative terms such as “feminazi” in their attacks against #MeToo. The nature of the current backlash can thus be summarized as a “caricatured version of anti-rape discourse that is portrayed as panicked and vengeful, which is partly a function of scholarship on victimhood and partly a function of right-wing polemic growing out of a nihilistic online milieu” (Philipps and Chagnon, 2021, p. 12).

Despite denying claims of legitimate victimhood to women, it is particularly interesting to note how both the letter and some users in the Twitter sample retort by constructing a new category of victims: men as the “real victims” of #MeToo. The concept of “himpathy” has been used to describe how an accused (powerful) man can elicit a particular kind of sympathy from the public that ends up “effectively making him into the victim of his own crimes” (Manne, 2018, p. 210). The construction of men as victims can be placed in a wider context of stories about white male victimhood, which have been central to recent events such as Brexit, Black Lives Matter, and the election of Trump (Chouliaraki and Banet-Weiser, 2021; Phipps, 2021). In this vein, some users in the Twitter sample contend that it is *all* men who are being victimised by the public call-out on the problematic or violent behaviours of *some* accused men. As Boyle (2024) notes, in these discourses the #MeToo movement is “recast in the role of the perpetrator” (p. 80), while all men, as well as anyone who criticises #MeToo, become victims of an all-powerful movement. The amorphousness of these roles can be observed in the Twitter sample: users who agree with the letter’s argument that men are under attack do so based on an abstract claim – no real-life examples or names are given. On the other hand, some users are critical of the letter’s intentions in reference to the naming of known abusers, such as Roman Polanski, since they feel that the perpetrators of actual crimes are hard to defend. More generally, critics of #MeToo choose to portray it as an abstract but dangerous entity, removing the experiences of individual survivors from the

⁵ Dockers is a brand of men’s clothing.

narrative while maintaining that #MeToo represents an attack on men as well as on common-sense (Boyle, 2024). This also parallels what Phipps calls the “hand-on-knee trope” that is often used to discredit stories of sexual violence by positioning women as “over-sensitive” and unable to distinguish between harmless actions and “real” sexual violence (Phipps, 2019, 14). In this sense, users in the sample often sympathise with the letter’s claim that men have suffered professional consequences for “touch[ing] a woman’s knee” or “try[ing] to steal a kiss” (Chiche et al., 2018). It is unclear who the authors are referring to, as they fail to name the men who have incurred such punishments, while they place more emphasis on the “totalitarian” nature of #MeToo. The claims of the dire consequences for the lives and careers of the accused men, then, appear partly unfounded; this seems to confirm the idea that it is the public discussion of these stories that is most troubling to #MeToo detractors.

8. Conclusion

The present study has identified some key themes in the Twitter discussion on the “anti-#MeToo” letter published in *Le Monde* in January 2018. The findings illuminate the intertwining discourses of popular feminism and popular misogyny in the current debate on gender politics. Expressions of popular feminism such as #MeToo are actively obtaining visibility in the media and in the public arena; at the same time, by aiming to challenge patriarchal institutions, they also provoke anti-feminist backlash. This study adds to the existing body of knowledge on the circulation of and reactions to #MeToo and related hashtags in European contexts (e.g., Arriaza Ibarra and Berumen, 2019; Corsi et al., 2019; Knüpfer et al., 2022) and beyond (e.g., Belotti et al., 2023; Boyle and Rathnayake, 2020). It is recommended that future studies should examine the transformation of both feminist and anti-feminist discourses in subsequent iterations of the “long #MeToo moment”.

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