Sentenced by the court of Social Media

A qualitative analysis of informal justice-related social media mechanisms within the #MeToo-movement

by

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Abstract:

This study examines how the #MeToo-movement was influenced by different forms of informal justice on the social media platform Twitter in 2017. Furthermore, online U.S. news media is analyzed in its contributory role during the movement. Thus, these two sites of analysis also highlight the interplay between social media and online news sources. Therefore, the research questions are:

R.Q. 1: How were different forms of informal justice facilitated through networked activism on Twitter during the 2017 #MeToo-movement?
R.Q. 2: In what ways did the reporting of online U.S. news media contribute to the mechanisms of informal justice on social media during the 2017 #MeToo-movement?

Both questions are answered through two independent qualitative content analyses: The first critically evaluates 80 tweets from the social media platform Twitter that were published between October 15 - December 31, 2017, with the hashtag #MeToo; the second reviews 12 online articles from online U.S. news sources that reported about the online proliferation of the #MeToo-movement.

While the results contained online shaming of celebrities and public figures, no distinctive forms of punishment or vigilantism could be identified within the samples. Furthermore, victims of abuse engaged in self-disclosure without exposing their abusers. Still, informal justice could be understood as a way to speak up against societal injustice by expressing a clear warning towards sexual perpetrators through digitally networked activism. At the same time, online news source merely reiterated social media developments without engaging in additional online shaming. However, these news sources also participated in #MeToo-related justice by spreading further awareness about the movement. Thus, a reciprocal relationship between social media and online U.S. news media became evident.

Keywords: social media, Twitter, informal justice, public shaming, vigilantism, cyber activism, #MeToo, qualitative content analysis
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I. Introduction

Informal justice can develop when “legal institutions fail to provide effective remedies for large segments of the population...” (World Justice Project, 2018). It offers citizens many possibilities to take action while authorities are unable or unwilling to take charge. While today’s social media platforms have become popular spaces for cyber activism, their affordances to effectively mobilize large crowds are ideal prerequisites for informal justice practices, such as online shaming and cybervigilantism. Although several studies in this field have been conducted in China, research about informal justice appears limited in Western academia. This thesis tries to close this research gap by exploring informal justice practices in connection with the recent #MeToo-movement, which was born and expanded on the social media platform Twitter in 2017. While many have praised #MeToo in its ubiquitous fight against sexual harassment, critical voices have described it as a witch hunt of networked activists who engage in online vigilantism on social media. In addition, many men have been condemned online as sexual predators without the existence of explicit evidence. Here, celebrities, such as actor James Franco and reporter Geraldo Rivera, have been accused of sexual misconduct over Twitter (Glamour, 2018). This raises the question whether social media platforms should be understood as new tools for informal justice practices.

1.1 Purpose

By drawing on two qualitative content analyses, this thesis aims to examine the articulation of informal justice through the affordances of Twitter and online U.S. news sources during the #MeToo-Movement in 2017. This approach shall give answers to the following research questions:

**R.Q. 1:** How were different forms of informal justice facilitated through networked activism on Twitter during the 2017 #MeToo-movement?

**R.Q. 2:** In what ways did the reporting of online U.S. news media contribute to the mechanisms of informal justice on social media during the 2017 #MeToo-movement?

While the focus lies on the articulation of informal justice practices, the combined answers to these questions shall also help to better understand the relationship and mutual influence between social media and online news media in the context of digitally networked movements.
1.2 Structure

This thesis is divided into nine chapters and features two separate qualitative content analyses. The general purpose and historical background of this work are presented in this introductive section I. An explanation of theoretical concepts follows in chapter II. Here, the concepts of digital self-disclosure, public shaming, and cybervigilantism will be explored in combination with Manuel Castells’ description of networked social movements. Chapter III. offers a conceptual literature review that discusses relevant studies, while chapter IV. details the data collection process and explains qualitative content analysis as a method. Finally, two samples of 80 tweets and a set of 12 online articles will be analyzed in chapter V. These findings will then be brought into a broader, societal perspective in chapter VI. After a conclusion in chapter VII., the appendix can be found in chapter VIII and all references to literature in chapter IX.

1.3 Background

When actress Alyssa Milano published a message over the social media platform Twitter on October 15th, 2017, she was unaware of the viral and social impact her mediatized action would cause in the months to follow (Sayej, 2017). The tweet (Figure 1.) included a screenshot that her friend Charles Clymer had sent to her beforehand and a sentence added by Milano (ibid.): “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet” (Milano, 2017a). The next morning her statement was trending as No.1 on Twitter’s ranking (Sayej, 2017). According to Twitter sources, the hashtag had been tweeted almost a million times in a time span of 48 hours, while Facebook had “more than 12 million posts, comments and reactions in less than 24 hours ...” (CBS, 2017). The online phenomenon was the digital backlash caused by reports from the New York Times and

![Figure 1. Initial #MeToo-tweet by Alyssa Milano, 2017 (Source: Twitter.com).](image-url)
The New Yorker regarding dozens of women that had accused Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein of decades of sexual abuse (BBC News, 2018).

Some users have simply posted the hashtag ‘#MeToo’ by itself, while others have added their personal experiences of sexual abuse (CBS, 2017).

What quickly became clear, was that #MeToo had touched a societal grievance; one that, according to Milano, is not just present within the social bubble of Hollywood’s infamous casting couch but also in all other corporate industries and private institutions (Sayej, 2017). The gravity of the problem is undeniable in the U.S., where a recent survey conducted by the non-profit organization Stop Street Harassment (SSH) has revealed that 81 percent of the surveyed women had experienced sexual harassment or assault (Da Silva, 2018). Thus, it is not surprising that the #MeToo-movement has caused a digital tsunami; one that destroyed the careers of film producer Harvey Weinstein, actor Kevin Spacey, NBC News journalist Matt Laurer, and other public figures in late 2017 (Pirani, 2017). Throughout this process, social media platforms have played a double role. They have allowed victims to break their silence by sharing their stories and have produced a new activist movement that is utilizing online affordances, such as sharing, commenting, and the use of hashtags to spread awareness (CBS, 2017). This civic movement has clearly presented Facebook and Twitter as today’s news-accelerators and public opinion makers. Here, traditional media – TV, print, and radio – has lost its monopoly and is now downgraded to the mere reporting and intensifying of scandals and news that have already been communicated over social media (Detel, 2013, p.94). The tweets of U.S. president Donald Trump, which bypass traditional media, are exemplary of this process. Thus, since we are increasingly living in what Manuel Castells’ (2004) has called “[a] network society whose social structure is made of networks powered by microelectronic-based information and communication technologies” (p.3), it is crucial to understand its inner workings. The view through Castells’ lens becomes especially useful when considering concepts that deal with user data, a networked commodity that has become extremely valuable for social, commercial, and political purposes (Gattami, 2017). Here, the disclosure of private information has also become relevant for informal justice. Personal user data can easily be accessed and utilized for public shaming and cybervigilantism – two informal justice practices that will be further detailed below. Thus, internet users need to be constantly
aware that their visible online presence can lead to a damaged reputation, public ridicule, and even job loss through a ‘trial by public opinion’.

II. Theoretical Concepts

The following theoretical concepts shall help to understand the interplay between different forms of informal justice and their expression on social media. Informal justice (IJ) “concerns the role played in many countries by customary and ‘informal’ systems of justice – including traditional, tribal, and religious courts, and community-based systems – in resolving disputes” (World Justice Project, 2018). Thus, not being backed by formal state legislation, IJ can be understood as a societal reaction towards a perceived transgression that deserves punishment but fails to receive it through the traditional system (Johnston, 1996, p.233). Here, activist movements, such as #MeToo, can lead to the use of informal justice-practices by activist and non-activist actors. These practices can branch out into different behaviors, such as public shaming on the internet and online vigilantism. Still, it is important to make a clear distinction between informal justice and mere online activism. While both can coexist and influence each other, one is not in need of the other. Furthermore, activism does certainly not require punishment, which is the actual delivery of informal justice according to Johnston (1996, p.233).

The first theoretical concept, digital self-disclosure, can be understood as a contributory factor that facilitates informal justice through the sheer accessibility of private user data online. Thus, it needs to be addressed first.

2.1 Digital Self-Disclosure

Ever since MySpace, Facebook and Twitter have become part of popular culture in the early 2000s, users have been confronted with the questions of self-disclosure regarding their digital identity. While privacy settings and visibility have come a long way on most platforms, the public display of personal data remains a crucial societal concern. The recent revelations of the Facebook user data transfers towards Cambridge Analytica, a British data mining company, have highlighted the risks that social media users face when providing their personal data to an open platform (Rosenberg, 2018).
Self-disclosure can be identified as “telling of the previously unknown so that it becomes shared knowledge…” (Joinson & Paine, 2007, p.2). Here, information sharing can take place between two individuals, as well as among larger private groups or organizations (ibid.). The motivations for self-disclosure on social media platforms can strongly vary. Within group dynamics, self-disclosure can strengthen trust and bonds between its members and create a sense of group identify (ibid.). At the same time, individuals that share their problems online might receive psychological benefits (ibid. pp.2-3). For instance, disclosing a disease on a medical online forum might lead to encouragement by other peers and offer useful advice. Similarly, online bloggers might care for “maintaining self-presentation, managing relationships, keeping up with trends, storing and sharing information, seeking entertainment and showing off” (El Ouirdi et al., 2015, p.2), when showcasing their personality to the public. Here, the financial compensation through product placement could surely be added to the list. Furthermore, different platforms offer different possibilities for self-disclosure. While Instagram and YouTube allow users to present themselves in a visual form, Facebook and Twitter are better suited for textual content. Here, all these social media platforms offer a networked community and the technical infrastructure that is necessary for a sender-receiver model. El Ouirdi et al. stress that

[s]elf-disclosure on social media is a co-creation process. This process involves the individual as well as his or her connections, as it includes both content disclosed by the user, and third-party contributions allowed by him or her to be viewed on his or her online profile (ibid.).

However, self-disclosure of private data also increases the vulnerability of an individual towards informal justice. The public online presence of a social media user is often manifested through text, photos, videos, or other kinds of personal information. At the same time, this very content can be “copied, saved, linked, shared, modified, and remixed...” (Detel, 2013, p.78) by other users. Thereby, the original context can be lost and a new one can be presented to a potentially large audience (ibid. p.79). Here, this ‘out of context content’ can become especially problematic when it includes societal transgressions or norm violations (ibid.). Therefore, having a clearly visible online account, which can be hyperlinked and shared, offers an open target for all informal justice practices that will be further discussed below.

It is crucial to keep these mechanisms of self-disclosure on social media in mind when contemplating about the #MeToo-movement. Sharing experiences of sexual abuse to the
general public is likely to be one of the most intimate self-disclosures that can occur within the cyberspace.

2.2 Public Shaming in Web 2.0

Public shaming is a practical product of informal justice. Naming and shaming’ seems to have three aims: “(1) to punish informally a named individual; (2) to inform the public about their actions or conduct; and (3) to criticize and express disapproval of them” (Rowbottom, 2013, p.1). When this kind of informal justice is carried out by news sources media producers can become involuntary collaborators of the state, since they take over the role of a punishing entity (ibid. pp.4-5). Considering the importance of one’s public reputation and personal image, public shaming by the media can be seen as a form of punishments by itself. However, when public shaming is transferred to the online world, the term becomes very broad. Online shaming includes all forms of gossiping and any kind of psychological abuse that takes place on the internet. Here, digital abuse can include online bullying with text or visuals as well as bigotry that is aimed at race, gender, sexual orientation and religion (Laidlaw, 2017, pp.4-5). Furthermore, online shaming can also be directed towards individuals that have transgressed social or legal boundaries (ibid. p.3); this specific phenomenon is called vigilantism and will be discussed in a separate section below.

Today, ordinary citizens – not just traditional media – can act as digital prosumers and are able to choose the targets of public shaming. In other words, “[j]ournalists – the former gatekeeper – are no longer alone in their ability to publish shaming and scandal-inducing material, as every internet user, alone or in groups can do so as well” (Detel, 2013, p.82). Therefore, since social media users are now in charge on ‘scandal production’, the traditional media is merely left with the augmentation or inflammation of transgressions that have already been revealed on the internet (ibid. p.94). Furthermore, as already mentioned earlier, digital self-disclosure makes anybody with an online presence vulnerable and a potential target. Thus, "it is not just those in powerful positions who become the target of scandals, but rather everyone living in societies in which people use mobile phones, digital cameras, and the internet” (ibid.). Therefore, the empowering affordances of Web 2.0 can easily turn a shaming aggressor into shaming victim and vice versa.

In comparison to traditional media channels, viral dissemination over the internet can reach a vast number of people instantaneously over mobile devices (Jenders et al., 2013,
As a result, viral shaming can hardly be controlled because it is no longer steered by media organizations but by unfiltered public opinion. This lack of control can lead to permanent consequences, as pointed out by Detel (2013):

With the help of search engines, shaming content can be retrieved from anywhere in the world – even many years after it was initially uploaded. Once spread throughout the internet, it is almost impossible to remove information completely. (Detel, 2013, p.93)

This permanence in the digital space can make life tremendously difficult for shamed individuals. Here, applying for a job or engaging in social relations can become very challenging, since Google searches are often utilized for first impressions (ibid.). Overall, online shaming is a very anarchic phenomenon. Only social media networks themselves – in collaboration with the state legislature – would have the power to regulate these processes.

2.3 Networked Cybergvigilantism

Another, more self-righteous form of public shaming is the concept of vigilantism. It aims to describe individuals that commit social and legal transgressions within society (Laidlaw, 2017, p.3) and could be described as an act of taking matters in one’s own hands, without the direct influence of the legislative authority. Les Johnston (1996) gave it the following definition:

vigilantism is as social movement giving rise to premeditated acts of force - or threatened force - by autonomous citizens. It arises as a reaction to the transgression of institutionalized norms by individuals or groups - or to their potential or imputed transgressions. Such acts are focused on crime control and /or social control and aim to offer assurances (or 'guarantees') of security both to participants and to other members of a given established order.

(p.232)

Here, Johnston (ibid. pp.222-230) identified six separate elements of vigilantism. These include:

1. *Planning, premeditation, and organization* – before the act is carried out.
2. *Private voluntary agency* – of its participants.
4. *The use or threatened use of force* – against transgressors.
5. *Reaction to crime and social deviance* – of a threatened community.
6. *Personal and collective security* – as a social goal.

While the legality of vigilante acts is often questionable (ibid. pp.223-233), the actual punishment – here understood as the delivery of informal justice – remains variable
When it includes violence, it is usually systematic and ritualistic, copying a pseudo-justice system; when there is no violence – citizen street patrols are a good example – it has a rather preventive nature.

Transferred to the digital world of social media, vigilantism becomes significantly amplified. It relies on the interactive nature of online platforms by making use of the collective intelligence and alternative knowledge of its users (Cheong & Gong, 2010, p.473).

A specific example of cybervigilantism can be found in China. Here, mediated search processes, so-called human flesh searches, encourage participants to collectively search and share geographic and demographic data about societal transgressors online (Cheong & Gong, 2010, p.472). Thus, the personal information is published with the intention to expose and punish the transgressor in order to restore legal or moral justice. This networked form of vigilantism clearly covers the first three points of Johnston’s (1996) requirements: Planning/organization, voluntary agency and autonomous citizenship (ibid. pp.222-226). However, the real danger certainly lies in the unpredictability of the illegitimate punishment that may follow – “the use or threatened use of force” (ibid. p.226).

Overall, there are certainly situations when a state would benefit from the networked collaboration of vigilantes. For instance, overwhelmed police forces could clearly utilize the efforts of voluntarily data findings. However, it needs to be highlighted that – just like in its offline form – cybervigilantism can encourage violence or other kinds of serious harassment through the exposure of societal transgressors. Here, the above detailed digital self-disclosure can certainly accelerate and facilitate the process of cybervigilantism, since personal data can be accessed more easily.

### 2.4 Networked Social Movements

The theoretical framework of this thesis would be incomplete without acknowledging the importance of networked social movements that have been examined by Manuel Castells (2015). He describes social movements as agents of social change (p.223), whose autonomous capacity allows them to “connect among the participants and with society as a whole via the new social media, mediated by smartphones and the whole...”
galaxy of communication networks” (ibid.). On this digital level, it is predominantly the younger, tech-savvy generation (between 16-34) that wishes to express its views against what it perceives to be an unjust social order (ibid.). Thereby, an institutional authority can be challenged, and traditional media easily be bypassed (ibid. pp.223-226). Here, networking technologies are essential tools, since they provide the platforms for expansive networked collaboration (ibid. p.249). These platforms offer a number of advantages towards online movements that can afford not to have an identifiable center, and yet ensure coordination functions, as well as deliberation, by interaction between multiple nodes. Thus, they do not need a formal leadership, command and control center, or vertical organization to distribute information or instructions. (ibid. p.249)

This lack of traditional boundaries makes online movements less vulnerable towards repression since oppressors will find it more difficult to identify a central target; furthermore, the driving force of internal networking deters unnecessary bureaucratization, as well as potential manipulation within online movements (Castells, 2015, p.250).

In regard to the initial motivation of social movements, Castells (2015) notes that they can “stem from a crisis of living conditions that makes everyday life unbearable for most people” (p.246), the mobilization however, is “triggered by outrage against blatant injustice, and by hope of a possible change as a result...” (ibid. p.248). A meaningful event (p.247) that is required to unleash social movements was also described by Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia (2014, p.369) who divide cyber activism into four phases:

- An initial triggering event, such as a new legislation or a social transgression, that detonates public reaction over social media.
- The traditional media response (TV, radio, print) that further distributes the news over its channels.
- Viral organization online that constructs the movement’s identity through shared concepts, ideas, and collaborations, which then become virally distributed.
- A physical response by the people, such as marches and protests.

This view complements Castells’ (2015) notion of networked online movements, which he describes as local and global at the same time (p.250). Thus, movements start organizing on the internet before transcending into the urban space through traditional activist practices, such as the occupation of streets and buildings (ibid.). Castells calls this hybrid space between online and urban spaces ‘space of autonomy’ and underscores its global relevance. He stresses a new interconnectedness that allows these networked
movements to learn and to be inspired by other experiences from around the world (ibid. pp.250-251). Thus, an ongoing global debate can emerge in which these causes are displays of cosmopolitan culture (ibid. p.251). Lastly, while social movements clearly benefit from social media networks in the cyberspace, it is important to understand these platforms as powerful tools and not as the causes of social movements. (ibid. p.223).

2.5. The Relationship Between Social Media & Online News
Social media offers the highest form of interactivity of all media forms due to its digital affordances that allow its users to share, endorse, and comment content (Anspach, 2017 p.594). At the same time, journalists from traditional news outlets have the possibility to actively disseminate their material on their own social media accounts, as well as having it disseminated by other users through the practice of sharing. However, they are not in charge of the algorithms that dictate how visible their publications end up being displayed on the platforms. Here, material from friends and family might be automatically favored over the content of news organization (Mosseri, 2016). In regard to news publications, Facebook states:

We are not in the business of picking which issues the world should read about. We are in the business of connecting people and ideas — and matching people with the stories they find most meaningful. (Mosseri, 2016)

Thus, Facebook is not selecting stories but providing their users with those that – according to their algorithms and user preferences – are the most relevant ones (Mosseri, 2016). Here, the main goal of Facebook’s newsfeed is to inform and entertain its users (ibid.). Unlike traditional media, such as print, radio, and television, that used to be the main sources of information, today’s journalists are in a competition with prosumer citizens (Anspach, 2017 p.594). Therefore, online newspapers cannot afford to neglect their presence on social media platforms and solely rely on visits and clicks on their official websites.

From another vantage point, today’s content distribution on social media allows bypassing professional media. In the political realm parties and candidates are now able to circumvent news organizations by directly connecting with the voters (Muller, 2016). Thus, “[g]iven voters’ low level of trust in the media, that is attractive to both parties, since it removes the journalistic gatekeeper. But it also removes journalistic scrutiny”
Twitter, for example, allows politicians to break news and decisions directly without having to rely on any media coverage, while news outlets are now forced to follow and report on these social media developments in order to remain relevant (ibid.). Thus, journalists must now report about both, the actual news story and its social media development. Here, journalists can specifically report on societal reactions that emerge from comments and additional prosumer publications on different platforms. In addition, “[g]oing viral” has become a news value. Something becomes news merely by virtue of the fact that goes viral, regardless of its substantive content” (ibid.). However, it is the private users themselves, not the online news outlets or the social media providers that get to decide which content goes viral.

Furthermore, social media users are able to personalize their newsfeeds by connecting to “the people, places and things [they] want to be connected to...” (Mosseri, 2016). This raises the question whether a social isolation takes places through the so-called ‘filter bubble’. The concept behind the ‘filter bubble’ assumes that when “users naturally subscribe and follow other users that share their interests, they get trapped in a self-reinforcing feedback loop: All they see is more information that “confirms” their beliefs, while dissenting opinions get filtered” (Price, 2016). Facebook Chairman and CEO Mark Zuckerberg negated this phenomenon by referring to previous research that found more diversity in Facebook’s prosumer newsfeed consumption compared to traditional media, such as television channels (ibid.). However, it is also clear that the news content that social media users can find in their newsfeeds are all shared content that emerges from their personalized networks of friends and acquaintances.

Finally, opinion leaders also play a crucial role on the consumption of online content on social media platforms. Here, the two-step flow of communication theory argues that influential opinion leaders consume mass media information and add their personal interpretation and judgment as an attachment to the actual media content before forwarding it to their followers (University of Twente, 2018). This additional influence is yet another decisive factor that can contribute to the virality of content on social media platforms. Here, social media users might be more interested in the consumption of news content that was pre-selected and ‘approved’ by an opinion leader of their choice.
In the end, this symbiotic relationship between online news and social media turns into a complete cycle, since social media networks are also relying on fresh and professional news content that can be spread and commented within their newsfeeds (ibid.). Thus, both digital entities form a reciprocal bond. However, news outlets must be ready to accept social media algorithms, compete with prosumer content, and deal with the subjective selections of opinion leaders to remain relevant.

III. Literature Review

Informal justice is a very complex phenomenon that is expressed through various subcategories. Thus, the following chapter shall offer a conceptional literature review that mainly focuses on previous studies that have been conducted around some of the above mentioned theoretical frameworks of informal justice, as well as the relationship between social media and online news. A complementary section at the end shall focus on studies that refer to Twitter virality. This addition segment shall reveal some of Twitter’s viral mechanisms, which will play a role in the analysis of tweets.

3.1 Previous work on Digital Self-Disclosure

In their study about self-disclosure on social media, Wu & Lu (2013) define it as follows: “what individuals reveal about themselves to others, including thoughts, feelings, and experiences” (p.97). Their quantitative content analysis of 1.180 social media profiles aimed at understanding national differences within the privacy settings of social media users in America, Germany, and China. It examined gender-based privacy settings, as well as cultural contexts. (ibid. p.103). Their findings confirmed their hypothesis that individualistic cultures, such as the US, are more prone to self-disclose themselves over social media than collectivist cultures, such as China. (ibid. p.105). However, the results also revealed that, in general, females “in cyberspace […] show more concern about the privacy of their profiles than do males…” (ibid. p.110).

These gender-based findings are similar to a survey conducted by Fogel & Nehmad (2008), in which 205 U.S. undergraduate college students were asked about their risk-taking behavior in connection with privacy concerns on social media. The survey indicated that participants with social media profiles showed significantly stronger risk-
taking behavior than those who did not have accounts. Furthermore, among social media users, women displayed less risk-taking behavior than men and a greater concern for privacy than men (Fogel & Nehmad 2008, p.157). In regard to social media, the authors state that “[m]en had significantly greater percentages than women for including an instant messenger address and phone number on one’s profile” (ibid. p.158). Furthermore, it was revealed that females were considerably more likely to write on other people’s profiles than men (ibid. p.158). Here, the authors assumed a greater need for women to “share their thoughts and feelings” (ibid. p.159).

A relationship between privacy and self-disclosure was also analyzed by Misoch’s (2015). While her research did not indicate significant gender differences within online self-disclosure, she could confirm previous research that claimed that computer-mediated communication led to a “higher willingness to disclose information” (p.539). She conducted two separate qualitative data analyses of YouTube videos. The first analysis represented content creators that shared their struggle with self-injury (self-harm), the second was about so-called ‘card stories’, where users disclose their stories on written note cards, which are held into the camera (ibid. p.536). Regarding YouTube – and in contrast to the above studies – Misoch concluded that “[t]here are contradictory findings concerning the influence of gender in online self-disclosing” (ibid. p.539). While her results did not point to towards gender differences within online self-disclosure, they indicated the importance of anonymity. Here, almost all video producers of both studies chose to remain anonymous by using pseudonyms instead of their real names. The majority of card story-producers, however, consciously chose to be visually identifiable within their videos (ibid. p.537). Here, Misoch concluded that “anonymity does not seem to be a necessary condition for people disclosing information on YouTube” (ibid. p.540).

Considering the above studies, it seems very hard to generalize privacy concerns and anonymity on social media. Cultural preferences, gender tendencies, as well as platform-related affordances are certainly influential factors when choosing to disclose personal information online.
3.2 Previous work on Public Shaming

In her study, Detel (2013) researched the transformations of scandal-making developments through internet technologies. Her qualitative analysis of 14 case studies (1998-2011) revealed five consistent phases:

- An original online disclosure of the transgressions through an individual or a group.
- Its further diffusion through viral online processes.
- The following formation of an uninhibited ‘cyber-mob’.
- An intervention of traditional media as a second publisher.
- And the resulting consequences for the transgressors, such as a damaged reputation (ibid. pp.82-94).

Here, the third aspect, the formation of a cyber-mob, contains a human component that Detel describes as “moral outrage as a reaction to norm transgressions” (ibid. p.91).

The findings of another study conducted by Hou et al. (2017), directly link this ‘moral outrage’ to one’s socioeconomic status and the ‘belief in a just world’.

Hou et al. (2017) examined the social effects of online shaming by having 245 Chinese employees express their reactions towards a societal transgression that was depicted online. The results showed that individuals with a higher socioeconomic status – here defined by wealth and self-perceived social status (ibid. p.20) – seemed to be more likely to engage in online shaming practices towards the transgression (ibid. p.23). At the same time, participants with a strong ‘belief in a just world’ – here defined by the need to maintain one’s psychological well-being (ibid. p.21) – were also more likely to participate in online shaming (ibid. p.23). Hou et al. note that online shaming “may help to reestablish social norms disturbed by the offender and further deter the offender…” (ibid. p.20). Thus, online shaming seems to offer a sort of self-regulatory affordance for society. At the same time, the authors highlight that “online anonymity may make people free from traditionally constraining pressure of social norms, conscience, morality, and ethics …” (ibid.). Therefore, shaming takes place anonymously. This assumption was also stressed in Detel’s (2013) study, in which the use of camouflaging pseudonyms was assumed to reduce a feeling of responsibility among users who integrate hateful and uninhibited language into their comments (p.91).

As shown by the above studies, shaming practices often take place incognito, protecting the identity of the aggressor who is reacting to what is perceived to be a moral outrage.
While one’s socioeconomic status and the ‘belief in a just world’ might be contributing factors for shaming practices, it is important to understand internet services as both, platforms that allow individuals to witness societal transgressions, as well as the necessary environment for active shaming.

3.3 Previous work on Networked Cybervigilantism

Chang & Poon (2017) conducted a survey with 295 university students in Hong Kong who were asked to identify themselves as an online vigilante, a victim, or a bystander in the context of what the authors called ‘netilantism’ (internet vigilantism) (p.1919). The results confirmed that ‘netilantes’ (vigilante online activists) were those who perceived the criminal justice system as most ineffective, had the highest level of self-efficacy\(^1\) online, and were the only ones who saw netilantism as a viable alternative to achieve social justice (ibid. p.1925).

In comparison to the formal justice system the authors point out that “in netilantism, when a person is identified, netizens rarely verify whether the identified target is the real perpetrator but criticize him immediately...” (ibid. p.1926). Here, contrary to the Western judicial ideal, netilantism disregards the assumption that someone is innocent until proven guilty.

Cheong & Gong (2010) explored how Chinese cyber vigilantes use emerging media as tools of civic participation through collective intelligence (ibid. p.474). They presented two cases that dealt with the transgressions of Chinese public officials between 2008 and 2009 (ibid. p.476). One was the attempted molestation of an 11-year-old girl by a senior, mayor-level official of the Ministry of Transport in Beijing (ibid. p.477); the other was the arbitrary harassment of a private driver through illegal imputation practices of the Shanghai District Traffic Administration Bureau (ibid. p.479). Both cases gained tremendous media exposure and led to the formation of a cyber-mob that forced authorities to act in the interest of the vigilantes. Thus, the official was stripped of his responsibilities and the driver vindicated (ibid. pp.478 & 480). The achievements were facilitated through the collective intelligence of vigilantes that collected and shared information about the transgressors online (ibid.). These two cases are certainly positive examples of trans-mediated information sharing as stressed by the authors:

\(^1\) according to Bandura (1970, p.193) the individual expectation that one can successfully execute a required task to achieve its outcome.
By harnessing knowledge and communication among voluntary pools of online netizens, human flesh search culminated in the exposure, collection, and circulation of personal data of corrupt officials, who could otherwise have escaped their due punishment... (ibid. p.481)

In contrary, Mona Kasra’s (2017) research presents a highly negative view of online vigilantism. The author explored online vigilantism by researching digital-networked images that were exploited over social media by terrorist groups, such as ISIS or anti-gay groupings in Russia (p.173). She concludes that

online vigilantism is not motivated by a desire for democratic engagement; its intent is the opposite of empowerment. So, while we can argue that networked technology advances pro-democratic ideology [...] the same channel for sociopolitical communication, particularly in visual form, has become the conduit for malevolent expression … (ibid. p.175)

The works of both, Cheong & Gong (2010) and Mona Kasra (2017), offer a divided view on cybervigilantism. One the one hand, mediated information sharing can certainly assist authorities (or disclose their wrongdoings) in regard to legal and moral transgressions; on the other hand, the ease in which propaganda distribution takes place over the internet allows vigilantes to humiliate, intimidate, and threaten minorities while promoting discriminating ideologies.

3.4 Previous work on Twitter Virality

Since this paper examines the potential articulation of informal justice on Twitter, research concerning the platform’s mechanisms needs to be addressed. Due to its limited character count within individual tweet-messages, the microblogging platform displays a unique example of viral sharing (Jenders et al., 2014, p.657)

In their quantitative Twitter analysis of over 21 million tweet messages, Jenders et al. (2014) placed a specific focus on retweets, which are tweets from a user that are being re-posted by other users within new tweets (p.657). The authors stress that influential Twitter users – thus with a tendency to go viral – are generally individuals with large amounts of followers on the platform (p.658). Their results showed that the numbers of retweets proportionally increased with the number of followers (ibid. p.659). The authors explained this relationship by pointing towards the high visibility that larger follower counts entail (ibid.). Thus, high visibility would lead to more retweets. Boyd et al. (2010), summarized various motivations for retweet-practices, including the need to
inform a specific audience, the wish to make one’s own presence visible as an audience member, and a loyalty towards the person who issued the initial tweet (p.6). Gandy & Hemphill (2014) also focused on retweets in their quantitative Twitter analysis of over 4 million tweets. Here, both studies – Jenders et al (2014) and Gandy & Hemphill (2014) – found out that that being virally retweeted was also linked to the frequency of being mentioned on the platform. However, while Gandy & Hemphill (2014) concluded that the most accurate retweet-predictor was being mentioned on the platform (p.4), Jenders et al.’s (2014) results showed that having some mentions increases the retweet-rate, while having to many mentions (or hashtags) decreases it (p.660). Jenders et al. explained this decrease with a potential waste of limited character space through mentions and hashtags (ibid.). Lastly, in contrast to the findings of the quantitative content analysis of Wadbring and Ödmark (2016), who found an increase in the viral potential of positive online news content over time (p.141), Jenders et al.’s (2014) results indicated that negative sentiments within tweets were retweeted more often (p.661). Here, the authors assumed that negative sentiments/tweets could potentially draw more attention from other users and therefore result in higher visibility and retweeting rates (ibid.).

Last but not least, virality is always linked to the technical properties of a specific platform. In addition, having a lot of followers and mentions highly increase the viral potential. Thus, placed in the #MeToo context, the influence of famous opinion leaders certainly contributed to the overall success of the movement.

3.5 Previous work on The Relationship Between Social Media & Online News

Studies about informal justice that specifically address both, online news outlets and social media, as well as their reciprocal mechanisms, are extremely rare. One exception however, is the study of Einwiller et al. (2017).

In their quantitative content analysis of 401 German print and online news articles, Einwiller et al. (2017) analyzed the occurrence of ‘online firestorms’ surrounding journalistic practices. Online firestorms can be defined as attempts of scandalization that
are a “sudden discharge of large quantities of messages containing negative [Word-of-mouth] and complaint behavior against a person, company, or group in social media networks” (J. Pfeffer et al., 2017, p.118). Hence, the study of Einwiller et al. (2017) could be understood as an investigation of the journalist’s role in the enhancement of informal justice practices on social media (such as shaming) through additional reporting. Thus, online firestorms that originally developed on networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, are being transferred to online journalism. The authors state that by covering not just the issue at hand but also the online outrage about it, journalists amplify the outcry by elevating it onto a mainstream communication platform. They release it from its echo chamber, thereby supporting the process of scandalization. (ibid. p.1179)

Thus, by further underscoring the online outrage in their publications journalists are able to enhance its societal discourse and magnify the scandalization. While the authors note that internet itself facilitates scandalization, it is negative mass media coverage that remains its driving force (ibid. p.1182). The results of the study showed that journalist seemed to report about online firestorms more often in online news than in print (ibid. p.1190). Furthermore, the firestorms that were covered most frequently were the ones containing rectifications, where “people aimed at short- and long-term corrections of perceived injustices and deficiencies in society and politics” (ibid. p.1191), whereas firestorms that described vilifications – here the denouncing of public figures/organizations for their perceived misconducts and incompetency (ibid. p.1188) – were covered more rarely (ibid. p.1191).

Thus, the authors concluded that online firestorm-news coverage was mainly focused on helping audiences to find topics of social relevance and more rarely aiming at the vilification of a person/institution (ibid.). Therefore, the endeavors of online news outlets should be understood as “facilitators of publics’ scandalization attempts and participatory democracy” (ibid.).

Other studies have looked at the interplay between online news and social media without specifically focusing on informal justice practices. Yet, they are still relevant in connection with the second research question that addresses the mechanisms between these two nodal points.
Almgren and Olsson (2016) conducted a quantitative content analysis of 3,444 Swedish online newspapers stressing that “[t]he interplay of online news, social media and users’ participatory practices has become increasingly salient on news sites” (p.67), since “[u]sers can post article comments and share news through Facebook and Twitter” (ibid.). Thus, their study focused on the participatory affordances of social media platforms (sharing/commenting) in relation to online news sources (ibid. p.71). In addition, it was also clarified that news producers are the ones in charge of structuring the participatory space for the users that come to their sites (ibid.).

The results of the study showed that sharing online news through Facebook was an overwhelmingly dominant practice in comparison to commenting directly on news sites or using Twitter (ibid. p.78). Therefore, the authors assumed that Facebook’s appeal could be explained by its personalized network structure in contrast to more open, less personal networks, such as Twitter (ibid. p.79) Thus, “[t]he practice of tweeting news is unidirectional in the sense that the user tweeting does not control the viewer” (ibid.). Another finding was that the general affordance to share news on the social media platforms are also permitted to a much higher degree than the possibility to comment directly on the articles of news websites (ibid. p.75). Here, the sharing through social media could be seen as safer and more beneficial practice for producers (ibid. p.79). Overall, the authors conclude that “social media, (i.e., Facebook and Twitter) must be described as having been very successful in their interplay with news sites...” (ibid.).

Finally, a third study conducted by Faroan et al. (2014) examined the different influences between online news and social networking sites in regard to political campaigns. A web-based experiment mimicking a political election campaign was conducted through two fictitious candidates. Here, campaign contents were said to be published by *The New York Times* and Facebook & Twitter. A group of 139 participants reacted to these different ‘campaign publications’ on questionnaires (pp.235-236). The results pointed towards two important factors that seemed to differentiate online news and social media in relation to political campaigning:

1. The data indicated that participants were rather skeptical towards social networking sites and not influenced by the information disseminated from these platforms, whereas “[o]nline news media was expected to have more credibility in the eyes of the participants, because their editorial processing seems to guarantee that certain standards
are upheld” (ibid. p.243). That being said, this does not necessarily mean that social networking sites cannot display high-quality news content (ibid.).

2. Secondly, negative news seemed to have a stronger importance on voting attitudes than positive ones, “particularly when they appeared in online news compared to social networking sites” (ibid. p.244).

The general perception about editorial trustworthiness between social media-shared news content and the ‘official’ online news publishers might subjectively differ among different audiences. This matter becomes even more complicated when both sides embed each other’s content within their respective publications. This is a phenomenon that will be further addressed in the analysis section of this paper. However, the findings regarding the strong impact of negative news are somewhat compatible with the findings of Jenders et al. (2014), which were mentioned earlier in the section about Twitter virality. There, tweets with negative sentiments seemed to be retweeted more often (p.661). Thus, in unison with the findings of Faroan et al. (2014), negativity seems to attract high amounts of attention on the internet and often appears to be the trigger for controversial online debates.

Overall, these studies have underscored the reciprocal relationship between social media platforms and online news outlets. The analysis of online news articles, which is a substantial part of this thesis, shall help to reveal this complex relationship in a qualitative manner.

### IV. Method

#### 4.1 Data Collection

Two separate datasets were collected to analyze informal justice online, including a selection of 80 Twitter messages (tweets) and a sample of 12 online news articles from U.S. media websites. Random sampling was used for the entire data of tweets and articles to avoid researcher bias. Here, a more targeted sampling of ‘more interesting’ tweets and articles might have falsified the results. It was therefore important to choose tweets and articles that were randomly selected over the entire timeframe of the analysis. If only October tweets would have been selected, the development of the
further movement would have been ignored; likewise, if the article sample would have only contained publications from the beginning of the movement, its later consequences would have been disregarded. Furthermore, if tweets with online shaming and articles with shaming reinforcement would have been cherry-picked, the entire study would have offered a falsified impression of the actual online developments during the #MeToo-movement. Therefore, random sampling was crucial.

Here, the first step was to gain an understanding of the individualized use of Twitter, the original microblogging platform that was responsible for the dissemination of #MeToo-movement. The second step was to examine the influence that U.S. online news might have had on the proliferation of the movement on social media. Therefore, it was important to assess both datasets individually, while still applying similar requirements for their collections.

Due to the ongoing magnitude of #MeToo, it was important to confine the research to a clearly defined timeframe. Hence, all gathered tweets and articles were published somewhere between October 15th - December 31st, 2017. The Twitter-collection took place through Twitter’s Advanced search section (Figure 2). Here, it is possible to retrieve tweets according to their individual properties, such as keywords, hashtags, language, account name, location, and date. This advanced search section was used for all tweets. Furthermore, to improve their representativeness and valence, the entire sample of 80 tweets was collected as four separate groups. Here, each group of 20 tweets was paired with specific requirements:

4.1.1 Milano Tweets
The 20 tweets of this sample came from the Twitter account of actress and activist Alyssa Milano. Milano had ignited the #MeToo-movement with her tweet on October
15th, 2017 (Figure1.). This particular sample was interesting since it could reveal the potential engagement of an activist key figure in informal justice practices. Here, the following search criteria were added to the Advanced search: The hashtag #MeToo was entered in the section These hashtags; English was selected as a language in the section Written in; the account @Alyssa_Milano was added to the section From these accounts; finally, a date range between October 15th (Milano’s first tweet about #MeToo) and December 31st, 2017 was selected at the bottom. Here, the chosen timeframe was longer than it was for the other tweet samples since Milano is considered a key figure of movement. After confirming the search, all displayed Milano tweets contained the #MeToo hashtag and were within the selected timeframe. A random sample of 20 tweets was extracted from this pool for further analysis. In order to avoid researcher bias in the selection process, the contents of the tweets were not read during the extraction.

4.1.2 October Tweets
The next 20 tweets were not taken from any particular account and represented the entire public during October 2017. Here, the focus was placed on the initial public Twitter reactions after Milano’s first #MeToo tweet. Tweets from organizations and companies were intentionally excluded from this sample to receive an overview of unbiased public opinions, instead of corporate-driven statements. Furthermore, it needs to be noted that Twitter uses ‘verified badges’, which are placed next to certain usernames to visually confirm the identity of accounts that are of public interest: “Typically this includes accounts maintained by users in music, acting, fashion, government, politics, religion, journalism, media, sports, business, and other key interest areas” (Twitter Help Center, 2018a). Thus, to obtain a more balanced sample that was not oversaturated with verified accounts, 50% of the October tweets came from unverified accounts and the rest from verified accounts. The following information was added to the Advanced search window for the October tweets: The hashtag #MeToo was again combined with the English language selection while no specific account was entered; the timeframe on the bottom was October 15th - October 31st, 2017. Again, 20 tweets were randomly selected from the result section while the content was not read. Tweets that appeared to be part of an organization or company
were dismissed. Finally, 10 tweets with and 10 tweets without verified badge were chosen.

### 4.1.3 November & December Tweets

The tweet selection requirements for the two following months were identical to the October selection. Here, the only difference was the selected date range within the *Advanced Search*: For the 20 November tweets the timeframe was November 1st - November 30th, 2017; for the 20 December tweets it was December 1st - December 31st, 2017.

### 4.1.4 Online U.S. News Articles

The 12 online articles represent the second dataset and were evaluated separately from the tweets. As mentioned earlier, the goal of the article examination is to understand in what ways U.S. online news media might have contributed to the proliferation of informal justice on social media. Narrowing down the online news sources to U.S. publications that represented the country in which the #MeToo-movement had started, allowed to observe an interplay between social media and online news on a national and cultural level. This national interplay would have been lost if international online sources would have been taken into consideration. The first step for the article selection was to identify the most influential U.S. online news websites in 2017. Here, the online statistics website [statista.com](https://statista.com) provided an overview of the 2017 leading news websites in the U.S. ([Figure 3, in Appendix](#)). The popularity was defined by “unique monthly visitors* in millions” ([statista, 2018](https://statista.com)). While the chart represented consumer popularity during August 2017, a substantial change in popularity between August and October 2017 seems unlikely, since most of the listed news sources are well established in American society. Overall, the following search requirements were placed upon the article selection:

The articles were all retrieved through a search on the internet search engine Google. Here, only online news sources that were within the top 20 of the [statista.com](https://statista.com) ranking were considered during the search. To make sure this dataset was consistent and complementary to the Twitter dataset, it was necessary to limit the search to articles that were published between October 15th, 2017 (Milano’s initial #MeToo tweet) and December 31st, 2017. Furthermore, to provide a well-balanced
selection, each article had to come from a different source. Finally, as explained above, only American news sources were considered in the dataset. The search procedure on Google remained consistent for all article searches and included the name of an online news source – within statista’s top 20 ranking –, the hashtag #MeToo, and the year 2017. The Google result list was then worked through from top to bottom. Here, the first match that offered an article from a sought-after news source was taken into consideration, if published in 2017. To remain consistent with the Twitter dataset the contents of the articles were not read (aside from the headline) to avoid researcher bias in the selection process.

4.2 Qualitative Content Analysis as a Method

The method applied to both datasets – the tweet sample and the online news articles – is a qualitative content analysis. This form of analysis is not focused on statistical significances or counts; instead, it examines the emergence of patterns, themes, and categories to come to a conclusion (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p.5). This method was necessary for this thesis since the #MeToo is a character-driven movement that was produced by individual stories and intimate topics that would have been lost in a larger, quantitative approach. Hsieh & Shannon (2005) define the qualitative content analysis as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (p.1278). Thus, unlike its quantitative counterpart that focuses on massive counts of data to test hypotheses and to address theoretical questions in a deductive way, the qualitative content analysis tries to explore underlying meaning by examining topics and themes that emerge in a physical dataset (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p.1). Furthermore, consistent with the search of tweets and articles in this thesis, the qualitative approach often “consist[s] of purposively selected texts which can inform the research questions being investigated” (ibid. p.2). Here, inductive reasoning is necessary when comparing the raw data in order to synthesize meaningful categories and themes (ibid.). Finally, the qualitative content analysis used in this thesis will be conventional. Thus, unlike a directed content analysis that uses existing theory or research to establish an initial coding scheme and unlike a summative approach, which studies the context of single words quantitively and qualitatively, the conventional content analysis uses thematic categories that are extracted directly from the data during
the analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, pp.1279-1285). Since the “[c]onventional content analysis is generally used with a study design whose aim is to describe a phenomenon...” (ibid. p.1279) it is useful for the examination of a very complex occurrence, such as #MeToo.
Overall, the qualitative content analysis has eight distinctive steps that have been summarized by Zhang & Wildemuth (2009, pp.3-5) and were applied in this thesis. The following sections will summarize these steps.

4.2.1 Data Preparation
This step usually requires data to be transcribed into written text (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p.3). This thesis contains two separate datasets – tweets and articles – thus, a textual format was already present within both sets. Here, screenshots of the tweets from all four groups were copied into four separate Excel spreadsheets with their individual Twitter links. In addition, the four Advanced search windows, which had been used for Twitter the searches, were also copied into their respective Excel sheets as a reference. This Excel-display of all tweets, their links, and their respective search windows allowed quick verifications during the analysis process. On the other hand, the contents of the 12 online news articles were copied into individual Word documents. Here, Word allowed to search for keywords and to highlight crucial text passages during the analysis process.

4.2.2 Unit of Analysis
In order to code the datasets, it is necessary to assign certain themes as respective coding units (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p.3). Here, “[q]ualitative content analysis usually uses individual themes as unit for analysis, rather than the physical linguistic units (e.g. words, sentences, or paragraph) ...” (ibid.). Hence, themes can not only be expressed in a single sentence or paragraph but also through an entire document (ibid.). Therefore, individual tweets were regarded as entire textual units that were representative of specific themes. Likewise, the online articles were also understood as entire textual entities that could be assigned to specific themes.

4.2.3 Typology and Coding Scheme
Here, it is possible to inductively derive categories form the raw datasets (Zhang &
Wildemuth, 2009, p.3). While working with these categories, the first stage of the constant comparative method by Glaser & Strauss (1967) is a useful approach. Thus, a researcher “starts coding each incident in his data into as many categories of analysis as possible, as categories emerge or as data emerge that fit an existing category” (p.105). Thus, to facilitate this comparative process for the two datasets, coding charts were produced for Milano’s tweets, the general tweets, and the online articles. Each chart was divided into respective categories. The categories were a combination of repetitive themes that became visible in the raw data (RT), as well as intentionally created elements for the purpose of informal justice research (IE).

The categories identified within the tweets were:

The digital self-disclosure of Twitter users (RT); the spreading of the movement’s awareness without the shaming of others (RT); the shaming of alleged perpetrators or other Twitter users by directly exposing them on the platform (IE); directly addressing a Twitter User without shaming (IE); and direct calls for clearly defined action (IE).

Furthermore, tweets were also separated into two groups, pure text tweets, and tweets that included links to either web content or other tweets (retweets). Here, a retweet can be understood as sharing a tweet of somebody else with one’s followers (Twitter Help Center, 2018b). Finally, even if the analysis was not quantitative, the frequency of tweets within each category and the average numbers of comments, retweets, hashtags, and likes, as well as their highest occurrence, were still counted for the Milano tweets.

For the general tweets, the frequency counts of tweets in different categories were shown for individual months, as well as in an overall total.

The online news articles had the following categories:

Articles that had a positive/neutral stance towards the #MeToo-movement by expressing a sense of unity and change (RT); articles that were somewhat critical/doubtful of the #MeToo-Movement by questioning its overall effectiveness (RT); additional shaming within the articles that underscored or expanded the initial shaming on social media (IE); the presence of embedded tweets within the articles (RT); the possibility to share an article on social media (RT); and mentioned effects of the #MeToo-movement that went beyond social media (RT). Lastly, the number of articles in each category was also counted.
4.2.4 Coding Process

Initial Coding
This step is done early in the coding process to validate its inherent rules and to find clarity and consistency within the defined categories (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p.4). While producing the coding charts, initial samples from the tweets and articles were evaluated and assigned to the first thematic categories; then, additional content was examined to test the relevance of these first categories. This testing led to the amendment, addition, and deletion of categories and creation of the final coding process. Here, it is important to notice that tweets and articles were assigned to the categories that reflected their strongest characteristics. Tweets are short textual units and can be assigned to one specific meaning or concept. Therefore, single tweets were always assigned to only one specific category. Articles, however, are more complex and longer textual units that can contain several meanings. Thus, one article could include both, positive and critical opinions about the #MeToo-movement. Furthermore, some of the articles that could be shared also embedded tweets. For this reason, single articles were not restricted to only one category.

Entire Data Coding
After initial testing, the entire tweets and articles were coded into the existing categories. Here, it was necessary to verify the coding repeatedly, since new themes and concepts could change or enhance the coding process (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p.4).

Assessment of Coding Consistency
Due to human errors and the potential addition of new codes, it is necessary to recheck the consistency of the coding after the entire process has been completed. (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p.5). Thus, a final coding check was completed after both coding charts were filled with data in their respective categories.

Conclusions from Coded Data
This stage is about extracting meaning from the thematic categories that have been established through the datasets (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p.5). At this point, relationships and patterns can be identified within the categories (ibid.). While meaning was extracted from the tweets and online articles individually, it was also crucial to examine whether there was a relationship between the two datasets. In other words, the
articulation of informal justice through online news sources had to be compared with its articulation on social media.

Findings
Finally, the findings need to be represented in a truthful manner that aims at a balance between description and interpretation (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p.5). Here, single tweets and article excerpts were used in combination with the theoretical framework to reveal the mechanisms of informal justice online.

4.3 Ethical Assessment
At this point, it is necessary to address all ethical concerns that are linked to this study. The 12 online articles used in this research are all journalistic contents that have already been published and that have remained openly available to the public. Here, it needs to be stressed that all articles were not edited, shortened, or changed for the purpose of this thesis and therefore fully represent the original intention of the authors. All articles can be accessed through the links in the work cited section.

The Twitter dataset represents private opinions and statement of private social media users that could all individually control their publications. It is clear that “[o]ne of the biggest areas of concern with social media data is the extent to whether such data should be considered public or private data” (Townsend & Wallace, 2016, p.5). This question remains difficult to answer, especially since many platforms include terms and conditions that indicate the possibility of third-party usage (ibid. p.5). On the other hand, it is also known that these terms and conditions often remain unread (ibid. p. 6). To complicate matters even further, the notion of private user content can be understood differently on different social media platforms, since a password protected ‘private’ Facebook group can be considered private, whereas an open discussion on Twitter in which people broadcast their opinions using a hashtag […] can be considered public. (Townsend & Wallace, 2016, p.5)

Still, while Twitter users have shared their intimate #MeToo stories with the world, they have not agreed to be part of this study. Here, anonymity clearly remains an important consideration for qualitative research (Townsend & Wallace, 2016, p.6). Therefore, since it would have been very impracticable to ask for informed consent from all Twitter users that have been included in this study, all referenced tweets were anonymized. Here, each tweet has been assigned a number and publication date to
remain distinguishable. These numbers were used in the analysis section, whenever referred to a specific tweet (e.g. Twitter user No.1, October 18). Furthermore, the original source links, which are not listed in the appendix, will only be given out on a justified demand. The only expectation to this general rule was made for the #MeToo-activist Alyssa Milano. Her tweets were not anonymized in this thesis since she can be considered a person of public interest and her activist efforts on Twitter are continuously subject to public exposure.

V. Analysis

5.1 Results of Milano Tweets

The focus on tweets from activist Alyssa Milano is meant to reveal whether a major campaign influencer – in this case, its initiator – engaged in informal justice practices during the first two and a half months of the movement. As seen in Table 1, the sample of 20 random Milano tweets with the hashtag #MeToo contained four times as many tweets with links to other content – including embedded retweets – than pure text tweets without embedded content. This highlights how Milano’s participation in the movement was strongly characterized by the inclusion of third-party material.

Overall, the large majority of Milano’s tweets (13) were focused on the movement’s awareness. For example, a tweet published by the activist on October 18th, 2017 reads: “And this is why things MUST change. Not. One. More #MeToo” (Milano, 2017b). Here, Milano retweeted a tweet from the official Twitter account of The Girl Scouts of the USA that contained a link to an article from their website. The article raised awareness about the catcalling of young girls and how parents could take action against it (Girl Scouts, 2017). This tweet clearly demands justice through its clear focus on awareness. Furthermore, the expressive language insists that “things MUST change...”
While the capital letters of the word ‘MUST’ emphasized Milano’s assertiveness, the embedded article was utilized as both, a reinforcement and justification of the tweet. This process also highlights how nodal connections among different organizations strengthened and enhanced the movement. Here, connecting to Castells (2015), a sense of togetherness is being created horizontally by multimodal networks (p.253). He states that “[t]his is a key issue for the movement because it is through togetherness that people overcome fear and discover hope” (ibid.). Thus, Milano’s retweeting and the linking to other content does not only enhance the movement’s validity but also encourages its participants that the battle is being fought.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alyssa Milano: Actress &amp; Me-Too Activist</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Twitter Account: @Alyssa_Milano</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tweets from: October 15h - October 31st, 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sample Size: 20 tweets</td>
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<tr>
<th>4x without link</th>
<th>Categories</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Digital Self-Disclosure</td>
<td>Spreading Awareness of the movement without shaming, or addressing a specific person, or a call for action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tweet Count: 1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>16x with link/re-tweet</th>
<th>Categories</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Digital Self-Disclosure</td>
<td>Spreading Awareness of the movement without shaming, or addressing a specific person, or a call for action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tweet Count: 0</td>
<td>12</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Statistics of all 20 Milano Tweets</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On average per tweet: 261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tweet with highest: 1,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Milano Tweets, 2017 (Data Source: Twitter.com).
together from various camps. This finding is further validated by the fact that the Milano sample only included one single tweet that tried to spread awareness without the use of retweets or additional links, as can be seen in Table 1. Another tweet by Milano promoted awareness of #MeToo by pointing towards its transition from the cyberspace to offline marches: “#MeToo moves form social media to the streets with march in Hollywood on Sunday” (Milano, 2017c). While this tweet was not a retweet, it embedded a link to an online article from the Los Angeles Times that reported about the Hollywood march. Milano’s embedding of an online news source relates back to the reciprocal bond between online news and social media. Here, it is possible to reconnect to the two-step flow of communication theory. Being an influential opinion leader, Milano forwards online news content in a way that supports the Los Angeles Times article. Even if she merely repeated the article’s headline in her tweet it can be interpreted as an act of approval. Thus, the Los Angeles Times benefits from an influential opinion leader that forwards its article to a large audience of followers. In addition, Milano makes use of a credible source to further validate the movement. Here, the tweet seems to translate Castells’ (2015) notion of the space of autonomy, in which movements from the social networks on the internet “become a movement by occupying the urban space, be it the standing occupation of public squares or the persistence of street demonstrations” (p.250). As mentioned earlier, Castells describes the space of autonomy as local and global at the same time (ibid.), allowing an “ongoing, global debate on the internet” (ibid. p.251). Likewise, Milano was able to promote and increase #MeToo through horizontal interconnectedness, a sense of togetherness, and clear and demanding language. However, all of Milano’s tweets from the awareness category did not use Twitter as a punishing tool of informal justice.

Another retweet that Milano had published just after the movement had gone viral states: “[a] moment can create a movement. This is our moment. This is our movement. #MeToo” (Milano, 2017d). Again, like in the first tweet, this statement is short, concise, and bold in its language. Castells (2015) stresses that social movements “require an emotional mobilization triggered by outrage against blatant injustice, and by hope of a possible change as a result…” (p.248). Outrage and blatant injustice are keywords that refer back to the practical articulation of informal justice through public shaming and vigilantism. However, the results showed that the category for the direct shaming of perpetrators (or other Twitter users) only amounted to a total of three tweets.
Here, Milano composed a pure text tweet without any links or retweets, in which she shamed Donald Trump as “an accused sexual abuser...” (Milano, 2017e). Furthermore, she discredited attorney and talk show host Geraldo Rivera, who listed the legal requirements of sexual harassment, by retweeting his definition with the comment: “Oh no he didn’t! Is this for real?!#MeToo” (Milano, 2017f). Lastly, the activist embedded another article from the *Los Angeles Times* that revealed the harassment accusations against film director James Toback by paraphrasing that “[m]ore than 30 women come forward to accuse director James Toback of sexual harassment #MeToo” (Milano, 2017g). Being in the spotlight herself, all of Milano’s tweets were addressed to persons of public interest, not towards unknown individuals. Here, punishment, such as damaging someone’s public image, can be expected to be proportionally larger than it would for an unknown person. Not only are public figures more recognizable for large parts of society, they also have a much higher financial and social dependency on their public image than unknown individuals. However, this inference is not meant to diminish the negative effects that online shaming may exert on the general wellbeing of an unknown persons. Here, unknown individuals would equally be affected in a relative scale. However, besides the shaming of the U.S. president as a ‘sexual abuser’, Milano’s online exposure of other individuals could be considered mild shaming. Here, referring back to Rowbottom (2013), the goals of shaming include (1) the informal punishment of a named individual, (2) making the public aware of the actions and the conduct of a transgressor, and (3) the expressed critique and disapproval (p.1). Milano’s Trump tweet can only be seen as an expression of her disapproval, since her statement is unlikely to punish Trump in any significant manner, nor inform the public about something new or unknown. Likewise, Milano’s belittling retweet of Rivera’s legal definition does not contain real punishment either; it is also merely an expression of disapproval and might further inform the public about Rivera’s opinion. Lastly, the tweet containing the allegations against Toback does not even bother to express a clearly stated disapproval; it only acts as an informative source for Milano’s followers. Therefore, all three tweets that had been initially identified as online shaming within the Milano sample only included one or two elements of Rowbottom’s (2013) three aims of public shaming. Furthermore, in comparison to the high number of tweets from the awareness category, the shaming theme is extremely underrepresented within Milano’s sample and does not seem to be the focus of the activist’s engagement within the overall movement.
Considering all the personal stories that were shared with #MeToo, digital self-disclosure had to be a distinct category for all tweet samples. Here, the results in Table 1, only include one instance of digital self-disclosure by Milano. The very brief tweet that was part of the four ‘pure text tweets’, shared Milano’s age during her own abuse. In its simplicity and brevity, her tweet “#MeToo I was 16.” (Milano, 2017h) connected to the countless women that had come forward before her. Hence, Castells’ (2015) sense of ‘togetherness’ can again be identified at this point. However, Milano’s disclosure came nearly a month after the movement had started. As mentioned earlier, Detel (2013) sees a risk in digital self-disclosure, stating that one’s social media content could be modified and remixed out of context by others (p.78). Hence, by being extremely brief and by not going into any details, Milano did not allow her opponents to discredit her disclosure through an alternative narrative. Furthermore, by publishing the self-disclosure a month later, Milano was able to avoid being victimized at the beginning of the movement. This might have given her more freedom to steer her activist strategy from a more neutral vantage point.

Another very underrepresented theme within the sample was Milano’s direct interaction with other Twitter users that did not include any perceived shaming. Here, one of Milano’s retweets featured a message from a young woman who claimed that her friend – inspired by Milano’s movement – had created her own #MeToo-related awareness-project at a university campus. Milano responded by saying: “Send my appreciation to your friend. And thank you so much for sharing. #MeToo“ (Milano, 2017i). This tweet represents the last two points of the four-phase model of cyber activism that was presented earlier: The viral organization that further distributes the movement’s identity through shared concepts, ideas and collaborations, and a physical response by the people (Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2014, p.369). Furthermore, this tweet also stresses Castells’ (2015) notion of horizontal organization within networked movements, in which participants “learn from other experiences, and […] are often inspired by these experiences to engage in their own mobilization” (p.251). Thus, these developments, which emerge from within the movement, can be seen as an offline outcome of the movement that manages to spread public awareness without the use of vigilantism or any other extreme measure.

The last theme that emerged from the data referred to calls for a specific action. Here, only two tweets could be indented within the sample. The first meant to gather a large audience for Milano’s televised appearance on Good Morning America: “Please tune in
to @GMA this morning. I will be discussing #MeTo” (Milano, 2017j); the second asked all victims of sexual abuse to suggest relevant organizations: “Question for #MeToo victims that have reached out for help – what organizations do you think do important work in this area?” (Milano, 2017k). Here, both calls for action depended on the active involvement of the movement’s participants. The overall lack of formal decision making from Milano or any other centralized figure during the entire campaign is aligned with Castells’ (2015) description of open-ended networks that have no clearly defined boundaries and no formal leadership (p.249).

Still, having initiated the #MeToo with her tweet on October 15th, 2017, Milano played a highly influential role on the social media platform, as can be seen in the sample’s statistics. Between October 15th - December 31st, 2017 her tweets had an average of 261 comments, 1,400 retweets, and 5,800 likes. Interestingly, the tweet in which Milano publicly shamed Donald Trump reached the highest amount of comments (1,500) and the most retweets (10,000). However, it would be wrong to elevate the importance of public shaming in this particular instance, since Trump automatically evokes increased attention due to the controversy that surrounds his presidency.

5.2 Results of General Tweets

As in the Milano subset, the most dominant category within the general tweet sample was referring to the spreading of awareness with a total of 27 tweets, as can be seen in Table 2. Unlike the Milano tweets, this category had more than twice as many tweets without retweets or links (19), than tweets that included them (8). For instance, one of the users, who chose pure text to further awareness of the movement, stated in October: “#METOO brings awareness that women are mostly being targeted by men as sexual objects and never talk about it and live in pain. 2/2” (Twitter user No.1, October 18); another user uttered in November: “To all sexual abusers – you’re jobs, families, reputation, and so much more are finally at risk. Victims are increasingly emboldened and will speak out. #MeToo” (Twitter user No.11, November 20); finally, a third December tweet claimed: “The argument that women are using #metoo to conflate rape with ass grabbing is insulting and inaccurate. We’re saying inappropriate behavior has consequences - everything from losing your job to going to jail.” (Twitter user No.6, December 22). All three tweets raise awareness about sexual abuse without engaging in punishing acts of informal justice. Here, the
perpetrators are being called out as a collective group without being exposed individually: “targeted by men...” (Twitter user No.1, October 18) and “all sexual abusers...” (Twitter user No.11, November 20). At the same, the perpetrators are targeted with clear warnings: “you’re [sic] jobs, families, reputation, and so much more are finally at risk...” (Twitter user No.11, November 20) and “everything from losing your job to going to jail.” (Twitter user No.6, December 22). While Rowbottom (2013) states that shaming is to punish a named individual (p.1), these examples demonstrate how it is possible to warn a distinctive group of potential consequences over Twitter without engaging in direct shaming.

The second largest category within the general tweets was digital self-disclosure. As seen in Table 2., 12 self-disclosures could be identified in the October set and nine within the November sample, while there were none among the December tweets. Unlike Milano – who might have strategically waited before sharing – it is likely that victims of sexual harassment took advantage of movement’s initial hype and its overwhelming feeling of solidarity. This thought would coincide with the above-mentioned assertion by Joinson & Paine (2007) who stated that bonds and trust between group members are strengthened as disclosures take place within the group (p.2).

The data also showed that some individuals chose to disclose themselves only through the two words that symbolized the movement: “Me too. #MeToo” (Twitter user No.10, October 16), “ME TOO #metoo” (Twitter user No.20, October 17). Others, however, went into very intimate details: “#MeToo I've spent my whole childhood & teen years a victim to sexual Crimes. Thank you for showing me I'm not alone.” (Twitter user No.12, October 18), “i was just a child, you were supposed to protect me and love me. i was too young to know what you were doing to me, but now i know... #MeToo” (Twitter user No.14, October 18). Throughout the entire tweet sample, self-disclosure seemed to have a cathartic effect for its authors, offering the comforting feeling of an understanding community: “Hate to put stuff abt [sic] me like this on here but it's so important to speak out. I was a child. You're NEVER alone & you WILL heal. #MeTo” (Twitter user No.19, October 17). Hence, the remark of Joinson & Paine (2007) has not lost its validity today: “[f]or people using the Internet to talk about their problems (or to publish weblogs), their activities may well have unforeseen, positive, health and psychological benefits (pp.2-3).
### Tweets from the General Public

**Various Accounts**

*From:* October 15th - December 31st, 2017  
**Sample Size:** 60 tweets

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<tr>
<th>October Sample (20 Tweets)</th>
<th>Categories</th>
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<td>Digital Self-Disclosure</td>
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<td>Directly addressing of Alleged Perpetrator or other Twitter User</td>
<td>Call for Specific Action</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count for tweets with links or retweets:</td>
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<td>Directly addressing of Alleged Perpetrator or other Twitter User</td>
<td>Call for Specific Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count for pure text tweets:</td>
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<td>Count for tweets with links or retweets:</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>All Samples Combined</th>
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<td>Call for Specific Action</td>
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<td>Combined Tweet Count:</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
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</table>

Table 2. General Tweets, 2017 (Data Source: Twitter.com)
Overall, the most interesting result from the disclosure category was the fact that none of the victims who engaged in digital self-disclosure on Twitter exposed their abuser directly by name or the relationship title. While one victim alluded to a close relative as her abuser: “you were supposed to protect me and love me...” (Twitter user No.14, October 18), another woman made a direct reference to her former workplace: “Just remembering the executive journalist on ‘Mahogany Row’...” (Twitter user No.4, November 26). Here, among all of the 60 general tweets, only one went into more detail about his abusers by mentioning a nun/teacher and a neighbor (Twitter user No.15, November 14). Still, he used no names.

The most important category towards informal justice and the third largest out of all general tweets is referring to direct shaming. Here, 11 tweets were identified as potential online shaming.

It is interesting to speculate whether the above-mentioned ‘filter bubble’ phenomenon, which reinforces and confirms preexisting opinions, might have somewhat influenced decisions to shame others during the movement. However, it is rather unlikely to expect that a social media user (victim or not) would have been exclusively surrounded by so many victims online (or activists that shamed abusers) that it would have triggered a desire to shame alleged abusers just to comply with the bubble environment.

Overall, the shaming data strongly differed according to the selected timeframe. The October sample had no shaming tweets. In the November sample, one woman retweeted a tweet, which contained an article that accused a Hollywood celebrity of sexual abuse. Her comment was not directed directly at the celebrity but aimed at “*any* men in Hollywood” in general (Twitter user No.8, November 16). The other November tweet was a retweet that included the infamous Geraldo Rivera tweet regarding the legal definition of sexual harassment. The young women addressed Rivera directly in her retweet by saying: “I was sexually assaulted 5 years ago tomorrow and there were no witnesses, electronic or written communication? Are you calling me a liar...” (Twitter user No.13, November 29). Here, two elements of Rowbottom’s (2013, p.1) shaming characteristics are present, including the act of informing the public about someone’s actions and expressing disapproval. However, considering that Rivera cannot be seen as a transgressor for merely uttering his opinion, the tweet exposure of the young woman cannot be counted as a real form of punishment for Rivera.

The December sample had the most cases of online shaming (9). Here, all shaming attacks were directed towards celebrities, politicians, or other figures of public interest.
Three tweets were aimed at Donald Trump, all of them describing him as a sexual predator. (Twitter users No.3, December 22; No.12, December 27; No.14, December 29). Two tweets were directed towards U.S. athletes, including basketball star Kobe Bryant and football player Peyton Manning: “I’m honestly surprised Kobe Bryant managed to escape the #MeToo movement.” (Twitter user No.10, December 19) and “So now that the #metoo movement is in full swing, can we stop idolizing Peyton Manning [...] or does he still get a pass like other star athletes?” (Twitter user No.18, December 21). Lastly, one Twitter user went as far as referencing a website post from 2002 regarding the inappropriate remarks of a news commentator (Twitter user No.7, December 21).

Overall, it needs to be noted that the entire 60-tweet sample did not include one single case of public shaming that was not aimed at a celebrity or a person of public interest. Here, shaming of well-known people underscores the role assigned to today’s digital prosumer. As already addressed earlier, Detel (2013) declares journalists as no longer alone in their role as publishing agents of scandalous material (p.82). Thus, as seen in the above examples, Twitter prosumers can easily engage in online shaming practices. However, unless real revelations of previously unknown transgressions can be virally distributed to a large array of followers, these tweets gain little momentum and become lost in the cyberspace. Thus, due to the lack of actual punishment, public shaming was somewhat ineffective in the general sample and did not constitute informal justice in the way it was defined by Johnston (1996).

In addition, the category for addressing other Twitter users directly (nine tweets in total) had overall eight cases that included addressing a celebrity or a person of public interest. Here, only one tweet between two unverified Twitter users was a #MeToo dispute (Twitter user No.15, December 22). This underscores the above-stated preference to address Twitter-verified celebrity accounts during the #MeToo movement.

Lastly, there were six calls for action within the general sample. Here, there were two requests by users to retweet their message: “Retweet this to tell a woman...” (Twitter user No.3, November 28) and “RT if you beleive [sic] them...” (Twitter user No.12, December 27). One tweet called for self-determination: “DO NOT BE AFRAID TO DEFEND YOURSELF...” (Twitter user No.15, October 18). Finally, two further tweets encouraged followers to watch their #MeToo-related videos (Twitter users No.11, December 21; No.16, December 19). Overall, while these requests were a
5.3 Answer to Research Question 1

R.Q. 1: How were different forms of informal justice facilitated through networked activism on Twitter during the 2017 #MeToo-movement?

While the tweet samples contained cases of online shaming, they did not display punishment, which is a requirement for informal justice according to Johnston (1996, p.233). Alyssa Milano’s tweets mainly focused on third-party content to reinforce awareness and to legitimize her statements. Her minimal shaming on Twitter was mainly reactive and showed no signs of detrimental consequences for the alleged perpetrators. Aligned with Milano’s tweets, the general tweet sample only shamed public figures or celebrities. Overall, both samples did not contain a single tweet that encouraged vigilante actions.

Milano tweets mainly focused on the raising of awareness through third-party content, whereas the victims who self-disclosed themselves in the general sample avoided exposing their abuser, which would have been necessary to constitute punishment. Still, even if it could be argued that informal justice did not emerge from the results due to Johnston’s (ibid.) explicit requirement of punishment, informal justice could be understood differently in this case. It could be argued that all shaming tweets against alleged transgressors (if indeed true), as well as all self-disclosures of sexual abuse, have contributed to a form of ‘informal justice’ that was served by speaking up against injustice and by expressing a clear warning towards sexual perpetrators through digitally networked activism.

5.4 Results of Online U.S. News Articles

As seen in Table 3., all of the 12 online news articles were represented in two distinctive categories. The first contained articles that presented the #MeToo-movement in a positive or neutral way. The second was the embedded affordance to share the articles directly on social media platforms. While it has become very common for news websites to allow their audiences to share content, this point is still significant. Here, all
articles within the sample could be shared on Facebook and Twitter. This finding is connected to the previously mentioned remark by Mosseri (2016) that social media newsfeeds should allow users to stay connected with people or things they can relate to. Having the possibility to share articles on social media allow users to discover contents within their newsfeeds that they can relate to and that they might have otherwise missed or disregarded. An article that cannot be shared is therefore less likely to be read by a large amount of people.

Here, having the possibility to share an article that includes accusations in a #MeToo context could certainly contribute or spark informal justice practices on social media; this is even more likely if the person sharing the article has a network of like-minded friends that might share the article as well. That being said, the overall positive or neutral positions towards #MeToo were often expressed through an uplifting hope for change that was further enhanced by the positive affordances of social media. On Yahoo News, one could read: “Now that supportive consciousness-raising has moved back online, validated with hearts and angry and sad face emoticons, in a textbook example of what Facebook can be used for when it’s working right.” (Franke-Ruta, 2017). In addition, The Washington Post stated: “#MeToo hashtag blew up on social media in October, it opened the floodgates on a taboo topic and provided a platform for hundreds of thousands of people to share their experiences...” (Akhtar, 2017). While these comments painted a glowing picture of social media’s abilities to fight for a good cause, some critical doubts were also raised within three articles. In a BuzzFeed article, Kirsten King pointed towards the triviality of the hashtag while claiming that the gravity of the issue could not simply be expressed with two words: “And while the intention behind this call to action is noble, these two tiny words cannot begin to encapsulate what the two words mean for the people writing it” (King, 2017). Furthermore, The Washington Post article also questioned whether all the shared stories had really made a difference and whether something would really change (Akhtar, 2017), while CNN posed the question: “can a hashtag, a meme or any viral moment -- no matter how widespread -- really turn into a lasting movement...” (LaMotte, 2017). Thus, while not negating its good intention, the main concern was based on the movement’s effectiveness in the offline world.
Overall, both categories – positive and critical themes – were the main focus of the news articles. A third category, which would have been the decisive one for a contributory role of U.S. online news reporting towards informal justice on social media, referred to additional shaming within the articles. However, this category remained empty. Not one of the 12 articles engaged in online shaming practices, which might have caused profound harm to a transgressor, if virally extended over social media. Here, journalistic punishment should be understood in two ways: The first punishment would be the publication of a ‘breaking news story’ that exclusively discloses the legal or societal transgression of an individual with proven facts; the second case would be an unverified, gossip-based allegation of a tabloid. In both cases, the journalistic punishment would emerge from a reputational (and sometimes legal) damage experienced by the transgressors. However, the articles within the sample merely summarized already published allegations that were already being discussed on
social media. For instance, the *Yahoo News* article reported: “A freelance journalist was dropped by Vice after an anonymous Facebook post inspired by #metoo publicly accused him of sexual harassment...” (Franke-Ruta, 2017). Thus, similar to Detel’s (2013) notion that traditional media is now merely “intensifying the impact of the transgression first disclosed on the internet” (p.94), online news sources are often just reiterating Twitter disclosures, which are already being discussed on the platform. While this reiteration could still create an intensifying shaming-cycle through inflammatory language or additional revelations, all articles within the sample remained objective and balanced, which should be considered as an indicator for good journalism. Thus, while the articles informed its audiences about the recent misconduct of the #MeToo-related transgressors, it did not engage in Rowbottom’s (2013) other two goals of naming and shaming, which require the informal punishment of a named individual and a clear disapproval of that perpetrator (p.1).

The last two identified categories were equally represented in the sample. While five online sources embedded the actual tweets from Milano and other Twitter users within their articles, five other articles connected the #MeToo narrative to offline developments beyond social media, such as politics, work ethics and the resignations of CEOs. Even though the articles showed no intention to further shame the alleged transgressors through social media content, the embedded tweets still displayed a symbiotic relationship between Twitter and the online news sources. As mentioned earlier, Milano embedded an online article from the *Los Angeles Times* in her tweet from October 20th, 2017 to display the impact of the #MeToo-Movement. At the same time, the *Los Angeles Times* article itself embedded the famous Milano tweet from October 15th, 2017 (Figure 4.). This finding reinforces the Muller’s (2016) remark that journalists need to be up to date with social media developments. Thus, the #MeToo-movement was clearly characterized by a reciprocal interplay.
between social media and U.S. online news sources. While this relationship did not necessarily generate informal justice through distinctive punishment, it certainly increased the relevance of the movement.

5.5 Answer to Research Question 2

R.Q. 2: In what ways did the reporting of online U.S. news media contribute to the mechanisms of informal justice on social media during the 2017 #MeToo movement?

The results showed that online U.S. news media enhanced the awareness of the social media movement without contributing to additional informal justice practices. Here, news articles could often be identified as reiterated displays of social media developments. Still, by raising further awareness about sexual abuse and harassment, the online news sources also contributed towards #MeToo-related justice on social media. While additional shaming could not be identified within the articles, they often embedded newsworthy social media content and could be shared over a variety of platforms. Thus, the articles also represented a symbiotic relationship between online U.S. news media and social media.

VI. Discussion

6.1 Summary of Results and Main Conclusions

The overall analysis of both Twitter samples and the online articles revealed no definite encouragement for online or offline vigilante actions. Furthermore, all tweets – including Milano’s – presented no identifiable punishments through online shaming. Here, shaming could merely be seen as a way to express disapproval or critique of a famous or influential individual. Thus, if the focus lies on Johnston’s (1996) requirement that considers punishment to be “the delivery of informal justice...” (p.233), it could be inferred that the tweet samples did not reveal informal justice practices. However, considering the public attention and ripple effect that #MeToo has caused throughout society, it could also be argued that informal justice requires a different definition for this movement. Here, justice was served through women’s courage to speak out about their experiences and through the act of making sexual
abusers aware that their behavior will no longer be tolerated. Thus, in regard to #MeToo, informal justice needs to be understood as a societal change that is meant to empower women and punish sexual transgressors.

Another important finding was the fact that victims of sexual abuse, which were represented 21 times in the general tweet sample, did not publicly shame their abusers by revealing their identity. While the reasons for nondisclosure might vary, it could be speculated that the act of sharing the abuse might be psychologically more important than naming the transgressor, who is likely to be unknown to a broad online audience. In addition, the sample of online news articles did not engage in additional shaming or any other form of punishment. This might have been possible if a news source would have decided to publish alternative or new shaming material in inflammatory language. However, the news sources merely reiterated summaries of Twitter revelations and did not intensify shaming-cycle. Instead, the articles connected the online movement to offline developments, such as political action and the resignation of CEOs. Still, the spread of further awareness through unbiased journalism fostered the #MeToo-movement and contributed to a form of ‘informal justice’ that seemed to focus on female empowerment instead of cybervigilantism.

6.2 Results from a Broader Perspective

This study showed that tweets and articles often embedded each other’s content in a referential way. Here, the reciprocal relationship between both social media and online news highlighted a symbiotic mechanism that takes places within digitally networked movements. Castells (2015) noted that the networking form of social movements “includes social networks online and offline, as well as pre-existing social networks, and networks formed during the actions of the movement” (ibid. p.249). Thus, #MeToo did not only take place on social media but was depending on a mobilization through various media channels. Here, this multimodal connection of social movements between online media and news media could be compared to a clockwork that requires multiple ‘digital cogwheels’ to bring relevance to a mediated campaign, such as #MeToo. However, it is important to realize that the different elements of this interplay are facing different standards of publication. While tweets can be free floating expressions of emotions, individual experiences, and personal opinions, formal news sources are
expected to focus on objective and balanced reporting. However, without the interplay of both entities #MeToo would easily lose its relevance, since “[s]ocial media is littered with the digital bones of once-vibrant hashtags and memes...” (LaMotte, 2017). Finally, by capitalizing on emotional movements, such as #MeToo, online news sources can remain relevant in a competitive news industry.

Combined, all these developments and media affordances created an environment that allowed public opinion leaders, such as Alyssa Milano, to steer #MeToo in an effective and consistent manner.

The results of this study did not confirm the encouragement of vigilante actions over social media. However, countries with collectivist cultures, such as China, have shown how easy it is to engage in vigilante ‘human flesh searches’ online. The internet presence of vigilantism should therefore not be ignored and the potential to be identified and attacked on social media needs to be clearly understood. However, the question remains whether the use of informal justice practices will increase in the near future of social media. Here, it can be speculated that the rising importance of Web 2.0 might increase the importance of informal justice practices as the last resort when there are no legal alternatives to facilitate change. This thought was also addressed by Laidlaw (2017) who claimed that “shaming is entrenched in our culture, particularly to address social wrongs seen as outside the reach of law” (p.2). Thus, it would be wrong to label all forms of informal justice on social media as an utterly malignant occurrence whenever they lead to punishment. Its interconnected affordances offer anybody, regardless of social or economic status, the possibility to expose societal grievances, which might otherwise be ignored by the authorities. Hence, “[a]t its best, shaming can enforce rules of civility in online communities. It can be a facilitative force for positive change” (ibid.). Therefore, certain forms of shaming can certainly act as regulatory tools that protect the infringement of human rights (ibid.). Here, online shaming campaigns can openly fight against the unethical behavior of corporations, the disregard of labor laws, governmental corruption and last but not least, cases of sexual abuse. However, social media networks, such as Twitter and Facebook, have a moral obligation to bar informal justice movements from their platforms whenever they promote violence or engage in hate speech.
6.3 Limitations
Lastly, the limitations of this study need to be addressed. The content search on Twitter was utterly dependent on the platform’s search algorithms. While it was possible to confine the search through the selection of a hashtag, language, and timeframe, the presented results depicted Twitter’s so-called ‘Top’ tweets. The results could also be filtered by the category ‘Latest’, which would have displayed only the latest #MeToo tweets within the given timeframe; however, this option was irrelevant due to clear intention to include tweets from an entire period. Twitter states that “[s]electing Top shows Tweets you are likely to care about most first” (Twitter Help Center, 2018c) and highlights that “Top Tweets are selected through an algorithm...” (ibid.). Thus, these automated influences strongly affected the selection process. Furthermore, while all tweets were randomly collected from the displayed results, the manual selection might have been subconsciously steered by the favoring of tweets with more powerful or provocative statements. Likewise, Google’s search algorithms determined search results of the online news articles. Here, the manual selection process, which focused on retrieving the first articles that fulfilled the data requirements, might have also been guided by the subconscious choices of the researcher. Finally, while the thematic categories of the analysis were all based on the literary nature of data, the coding was still established through the researcher’s subjective perception of the texts. While additional categories would have offered a more detailed understanding of the tweets and articles, their analysis would have been out of scope of this thesis.

VII. Concluding Remarks
This thesis conducted two qualitative content analyses that tried to reveal the mechanisms of informal justice on social media. While the first analysis focused on the articulation of informal justice within tweet samples, the second reviewed online U.S. news sources in their contributory role. The shaming of famous individuals within the Twitter data did not represent explicit forms of punishment. At the same time, U.S. online news sources intensified the awareness of the movement without engaging in additional online shaming. These
results pointed towards a form of informal justice that was expressed through the reciprocal reinforcement of the #MeToo-movement between social media and online news media. Instead of requiring the explicit depiction of punishment, informal justice could be understood as the public validation of the #MeToo-movement, which expressed a zero-tolerance policy for any kind of sexual harassment or abuse. Therefore, Johnston’s (1996, p.2) understanding of punishment as the actual application of informal justice should be reconsidered. Justice – formally carried out through the state or informally applied through networked social movements – is not only served when individuals are punished but can also occur through a revolutionary change in society.

This thesis will hopefully contribute to the field of informal justice studies by being a qualitative example of networked social movements that effectively utilized social media without the explicit use of punishment through online shaming or cybervigilantism.

Future research in this field could focus on a quantitative Twitter analysis of the #MeToo-movement. In comparison to this study, a quantitative tweet search would offer a greater likelihood to encounter additional cases of informal justice. Furthermore, additional qualitative research could be applied to Facebook. Here, it would be interesting to examine whether Facebook users are more likely to engage in informal justice practices than Twitter users. Lastly, the articulation of informal justice could be examined within other hashtag movements. Especially online movements that deal with very personal themes, such as race, gender, and religion, could reveal important findings towards online shaming and cybervigilantism.
VIII. Appendix

8.1 Web-Sources of Figure 1-4

Figure 1. Initial #MeToo-tweet by Alyssa Milano

Figure 2. Twitter Advanced search, 2018, available at https://twitter.com/search-advanced (accessed: 04.05.2018).

Figure 3. Most popular news websites as of August 2017, by unique monthly visitors* (in millions), 2017 (Source: statista.com).

8.2 Data Sources

8.2.1 Alyssa Milano Tweet Sources:

1. Milano, A. (2017d, October 16). A moment can create a movement. This is our moment. This is our movement. #MeToo [Tweet] available at https://twitter.com/Alyssa_Milano/status/92042191434735616 (accessed: 07.05.2018)


5. Milano, A. (2017, December 6). I’m honored to be a part of the Time Person Year issue with @TaranaBurke. This is for every woman who came forward. This is for every woman who was brave enough to say #MeToo. I hear you. I stand with you. I see you. I am you. #BreakTheSilence [Tweet] available at https://twitter.com/Alyssa_Milano/status/941842010540982273 (accessed: 07.05.2018)


20. Milano, A. (2017e, December 5). I mean, what world are we living in that an accused sexual abuser is allowed to be our President and an accused pedophile is allowed to run for senate? These two things have many things in common - one of which - is the Republican National Committee. #MeToo [Tweet] available at https://twitter.com/Alyssa_Milano/status/9381860960805088 (accessed: 07.05.2018)
8.2.2 General Tweets:
Due to privacy protection of all twitter users that have been included in this study, the original usernames and the online source links will not be disclosed in this appendix and are only available on demand.

Reference October Tweets
Twitter user No.1, October 18. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.2, October 18. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.3, October 18. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.4, October 18. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.5, October 17. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.6, October 16. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.8, October 16. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.9, October 16. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.11, October 18. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.12, October 18. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.13, October 18. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.14, October 18. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.15, October 18. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.16, October 17. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.17, October 18. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.18, October 17. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.19, October 17. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.20, October 17. (accessed:10.5.2017)

Reference November Tweets
Twitter user No.1, November 25. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.2, November 29. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.3, November 28. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.4, November 26. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.5, November 19. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.6, November 19. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.8, November 16. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.9, November 11. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.10, November 9. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.11, November 20. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.12, November 19. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.13, November 29. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.15, November 14. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.16, November 12. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.17, November 11. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.18, November 9. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.19, November 22. (accessed:10.5.2017)
Twitter user No.20, November 20. (accessed:10.5.2017)

Reference December Tweets
Twitter user No.1, December 22. (accessed:11.5.2017)
Twitter user No.2, December 22. (accessed:11.5.2017)
Twitter user No.3, December 22. (accessed:11.5.2017)
Twitter user No.4, December 19. (accessed:11.5.2017)
Twitter user No.5, December 28. (accessed:11.5.2017)
Twitter user No.6, December 22. (accessed:11.5.2017)
Twitter user No.8, December 20. (accessed:11.5.2017)
Twitter user No.9, December 19. (accessed:11.5.2017)
Twitter user No.11, December 21. (accessed:11.5.2017)
Twitter user No.12, December 27. (accessed:11.5.2017)
Twitter user No.13, December 30. (accessed:11.5.2017)
Twitter user No.14, December 29. (accessed:11.5.2017)
Twitter user No.15, December 22. (accessed:11.5.2017)
Twitter user No.16, December 19. (accessed:11.5.2017)
Twitter user No.17, December 18. (accessed:11.5.2017)
Twitter user No.18, December 21. (accessed:11.5.2017)
Twitter user No.19, December 20. (accessed:11.5.2017)
Twitter user No.20, December 19. (accessed:11.5.2017)
8.2.3 Online News Article, 2017:


IX Work Cited


Milano, A. (2017a, October 15). If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet [Tweet]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/alyssa_milano/status/919659438700670976?lang=de (accessed: 08.03.2018)


