#MeToo in Germany: The Hashtag Campaign in the Issue-Attention Cycle

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Abstract

This thesis aims to interrogate how “issue-attention cycle” theory corresponds to online debates that address the issue of sexism, specifically the hashtag campaign #MeToo, in German online media. The issue-attention dynamics of #MeToo on Twitter are analyzed in order to understand the relationship between mainstream media and hashtag activism in Germany, and it is demonstrated what the #MeToo coverage can tell about issue-attention theory on the one hand, and how the theory can help to understand #MeToo on the other hand. To this end, the results of a content analysis of Twitter posts with #MeToo by four major German newspapers, representative of the German online media landscape, were compared to previous hashtag campaigns in Germany that addressed the same topic. In addition, five media experts as well as academics were interviewed, and their insights used to identify the issue-attention dynamics of #MeToo. Anthony Downs’ (1972) “issue-attention cycle” theory is then applied to the hashtag. The results show that so far there have been many ups and downs of attention in the lifecycle of #MeToo, but public attention has not ended. The research also finds that hashtags emanating from the United States, and especially from individuals related to the American entertainment industry, receive far more attention than corresponding hashtags originating in Germany, even though they address the same topic. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the deployment of the issue-attention cycle showed that a modified model is necessary to address the fast-changing attention dynamics of hashtags on Twitter. Instead of a cycle, attention can be better demonstrated through waves. Adding the variables “new events” and the hashtag as a connector of events and issues to the model helps to better understand current media structures and their attention dynamics, which are strongly influenced by social media.

Keywords: MeToo, hashtags, issue-attention cycle, Twitter, sexism, attention dynamics, social media
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1. Introduction

Since its beginnings, the Internet has changed the way news information is consumed (Dimmick et al. 2004, p. 20). Print media are facing a challenge as they are not able to keep up with the fast way news is distributed via the internet. Social media platforms go along with this development and contribute to the fast pace with which media is distributed when users share, like, or comment on news articles. However, social media are often themselves the focus of media attention, so also in the case of the ongoing debate about sexual violence and harassment triggered by the hashtag #MeToo on Twitter. Ever since a celebrity posted this hashtag in October 2017, it has been discussed, shared, and used by others who have had similar experiences (Sini 2017).

In Germany, the hashtag was often posted and recalls a hashtag used in an earlier debate in 2013: #aufschrei. It was created after a candidate of the political party FDP made an inappropriate comment about a journalist (Caspari 2014). What followed was a storm of tweets about sexual harassment in Germany, around 60,000 in two weeks (Caspari 2014). However, the hashtag seemed to disappear and five years after, #MeToo called it to mind again.

The dynamics of attention that issues such as sexism receive has been the focus of studies for a long time. Several researchers looked at how the “issue-attention cycle” theory put forward by Anthony Downs (1972), which alludes to five stages of media attention, can be applied to topics like global warming or terrorism by analyzing how they were covered by the mass media (McDonald 2009; Lörcher & Neverla 2015; Petersen 2009; Hall 2002). By doing so, one can find out what role the media plays in setting the agenda and how media coverage affects both audience and policymakers. These things are relevant to study as they are incorporated in our everyday life, and more research about issue-attention dynamics on online media leads to a better understanding and rethinking of current media structures. In a society where social media seems to be an important platform for public discussions, hashtags such as #MeToo can reach a large audience and when they turn out to be so powerful, they might be able to challenge current societal and media structures and lead to political changes to some extent. However, this is a process which takes time and is not immediately visible, which is why it is important to observe issue-attention of such things to be able to trace changes back to its beginnings.

To investigate this modern phenomenon and current discussion and to better understand the dynamics of how such a hashtag receives and creates attention, my proposed research questions are as follows:

**What have been the attention dynamics in the lifecycle of the hashtag #MeToo in German online news media and what does this demonstrate about the relationship between mainstream media and hashtag activism in Germany?**

And in turn,
What can the media coverage of #MeToo tell us about issue-attention of social movements on Twitter and on the other hand, how can the issue-attention theory help us understand #MeToo?

In addressing these research questions, I will draw on the “issue-attention cycle” theory and, in order to place it in the broader school of thought, I will also briefly draw on the theories of news values and selection, agenda setting, framing, and priming. I examine what German newspapers have been posting about #MeToo on Twitter to understand the lifecycle of the hashtag and therefore argue for public interest in it. I will also compare it to the degree of attention that previous hashtags on sexism in Germany received to see how the issue-attention cycle fits here. I will research the beginning of #MeToo and its development up until now and create a timeline to see where the attention was high, when there were gaps and how it is at the moment. In addition to this analysis, I asked experts from different social and media sectors in Germany about the power and impact of the hashtag so far. By interrogating how “issue-attention cycle” theory corresponds to debates about sexism in Germany, I am not only just addressing a problem in society, but by challenging the theory also a problem in the literature.

I will focus on Germany in this thesis as it is considered “one of the most dynamic media markets in the world” (Thomaß & Horz 2018) and since I am German I am especially interested in this media landscape.

My thesis intends to contribute to media and communication studies by demonstrating how mediated communication on Twitter affects traditional news and society, which is an important aspect of the field. It will also make an important contribution to issue-attention research in the form of an updated issue-attention model that fits to the attention dynamics of social media, specifically of hashtags on Twitter.

2. Context

In this section, I will give a short overview of the context to my thesis. I will first provide information on Twitter, the platform that is used primarily for hashtag activism as hashtags are “a common practice […] to interact with one another” there, and to “share stories related to [the hashtag]” (Yang 2016, p.14). Most importantly, I will give an overview of the #MeToo movement, where it comes from and how it developed to reach the media attention it now receives. Focusing on the #MeToo movement in Germany, I will also refer to previous online debates about sexism that included hashtags and compare their media development to #MeToo.

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1 By saying at the moment, I am referring to the last date I checked the Twitter presence of the four German newspapers which was July 7, 2018. Posts that were made after that are not taken into consideration.
2.1. Twitter: The Activism Platform

Twitter is a microblogging social media platform which was established in 2006. It allows its users to share information in so called tweets that are up to 140 characters long\(^2\). When a user retweets (short: RT) a post on Twitter, it appears on their timeline. Compared to other social media platforms such as Facebook, users can follow others without being followed back (Kwak et al. 2010, p. 591). User on Twitter create a short biography about themselves including their names and locations. In the profile the number of tweets as well as the followers are listed (Kwak et al. 2010, p. 592). With the symbol ‘#’ hashtags are included in Twitter posts. The word ‘hashtag’ is used as it is the combination of the hash sign and ‘tag’, descriptive for its purpose to highlight and mark certain words. The platform filters these hashtags and puts the ones that are mentioned the most in their trending topics (Kwak et al. 2010, p. 592).

It is this filtering system that makes it easy and effective to give people a voice and to spread topics, often societal problems. Twitter is a popular platform for activism as hashtags are used “as a vehicle for disruptive acts of political resistance” (Fang 2016, p. 139).

2.2. #MeToo: Origins and Development

The MeToo movement existed even before it became a popular hashtag on Twitter. In 2006, Tarana Burke founded the movement to help women, especially women of color with lower life standards who suffered from sexual violence (https://metoomvmt.org/). She wanted to show survivors of sexual violence that they are not alone and have a place where they can share their experience to be able to cope with it better: “We want to uplift radical community healing as a social justice issue and are committed to disrupting all systems that allow sexual violence to flourish” (https://metoomvmt.org/). Before Burke created the movement, she established a Myspace page that made aware of the topic (Ohlheiser 2017).

The phrase ‘MeToo’ was then first used as a hashtag on Twitter by actress Alyssa Milano after other actresses, e.g. Rose McGowan, accused Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein of sexual harassment in October 2017 (Sini 2017). Milano summoned other victims of sexual harassment and assault to unite by using the hashtag, but many also shared their stories on Twitter as a response (Sini 2017). What began with celebrities has been used by private people equally and started a far-reaching conversation about what can already be considered as sexual harassment and what could be done to avoid it to happen. The discussion was held not only in the film industry but travelled to the sciences and politics where people also revealed their experiences with sexual harassment (Sini 2017). Ever since the hashtag #MeToo first appeared on Twitter, there have been articles about the movement in several nations up to this day. The Time even honored all the people that shared their stories on Twitter and showed

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\(^2\) In September 2017, Twitter doubled in a trial the length of tweets to 280 characters (Busby 2017).
their empathy, called “The Silence Breakers”, to be the Person of the Year 2017 which was welcomed by Federal Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel, too (Zeit Online 2017).

2.3. Online Debates About Sexism in Germany

#MeToo is not the first campaign about sexual harassment that became popular in Germany. Looking at online campaigns only and researching for it, one that received a lot of attention was #aufschrei in 2013. It was used as a hashtag on Twitter after a candidate of the German political party FDP made an inappropriate comment towards a journalist (Caspari 2014). He told her that she definitely can fill up a Dirndl, the traditional Bavarian dress known to show much of a woman’s cleavage (Caspari 2014). Hashtags that followed were #ausnahmslos and #neinheißtnein. #ausnahmslos was created in response to the sexual harassment and rape incidents in Cologne on New Year’s Eve 2015 (Zeit Online 2016). 22 German feminists started a campaign against sexualized violence in which they demanded fast solving of the cases (Zeit Online 2016). #neinheißtnein was created in 2016 after a controversial German celebrity accused two men of rape, arguing that they did not stop after she told them to (Schareika 2016). The case received much attention and led to debates about whether a simple ‘no’ should be enough for perpetrators of sexual harassment and violence to be sentenced in court (Schareika 2016). In this case it was not at first and led, due to many protests, to a change of the law (UN WOMEN 2016).

Especially #aufschrei enjoyed much media attention when it was created, but this receded after a while which my content analysis will demonstrate. #MeToo then called it back to mind again.

3. Theoretical Framework

The core theory which I am considering for my thesis and the collected empirical data is, as mentioned earlier, the concept of the “issue-attention cycle”. However, to be able to understand and place this concept within a broader school of thought, I will also draw on theories of news selection and news framing, agenda setting, and priming in the following section.

3 English translation: outcry.
4 English translation: unexceptional.
5 English translation: no means no.
3.1. Issue-Attention Cycle

The concept of the issue-attention cycle explains the stages in which media is approached (Downs 1972). The five stages mentioned are as follows (Downs 1972, pp. 39-41):

1. The pre-problem stage

The first stage Downs (1972) explains is the “pre-problem stage”. The problem was not necessarily unknown up to that point, but mainly discussed by few experts or interest groups and did not receive a lot of media attention. Downs (1972, p. 39) further points out that “objective conditions regarding the problem are far worse during the pre-problem stage than they are by the time the public becomes interested in it”.

2. Alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm

In the second stage, the public becomes aware of a difficult social condition through mass media coverage. This often happens as “a result of some dramatic series of events” (Downs 1972, p. 39). After the public discovers the seriousness of the issue, it becomes overly enthusiastic to find a solution to the problem. The will to change a bad condition puts the affected government under pressure.

3. Realizing the cost of significant progress

In the third stage, the previous enthusiasm begins to fade as the public realizes what it would cost to solve a societal problem, not only in financial terms but also the energy one would have to use and what one would have to give up in order to achieve change. An example that Downs (1972) mentions, a controversial one that is discussed on and off up to this day, is the high smog levels caused by the automobile industry. First, people are eager to fight this issue and want to take actions until they realize what it would mean to them: quit driving their cars.

4. Gradual decline of intense public interest

The fourth stage is the immediate consequence of the third one. After the public realizes what it would cost to solve the problem, it starts to lose interest in it. The media does not cover the topic to such a great extent any more as it did in the beginning. Downs (1972, p. 40) mentions three reactions that set in: “Some people get discouraged, [o]thers feel positively threatened by thinking about the problem […] [and] [s]till others become bored by the issue”. Often parallel to that, some other problem enters the Alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm stage and therefore catches public and media attention, while the previous problem becomes more and more forgotten.

5. The post-problem stage

The last stage marks the end of media attention to an issue. However, compared to the “pre-problem” stage, the issue is perceived differently since some actions, like organizations, policies, or programs, took place to tackle it. These actions often only
scratch on the surface, though, and are not the final solution. After a problem has gone through the issue-attention cycle and was covered greatly in the media, it will appear faster than problems that are still unknown.

Downs (1972) states that not every societal problem goes through this cycle, but it has to meet three criteria: First, it is mainly a numerical minority who is addressed by this problem. Downs (1972, p. 41) claims that the percentage of the people affected by the problem usually makes up “less than 15 per cent of the entire population”. The issue of sexual harassment and violence does not necessarily meet this criterium as more than 15 per cent of the population might be affected by it. Second, the consequences of the problem are “generated by social arrangements that provide significant benefits to a […] powerful minority of the population” (Downs 1972, p. 41). Looking at the scandal that caused #MeToo, such arrangements between the film maker Weinstein and its actresses were made, therefore Hollywood in the greater sense and its employees, to endure sexual harassment in order to get a job. Therefore, this criterium applies to #MeToo. Finally, the third criterium is that “the problem has no intrinsically exciting qualities – or no longer has them” (Downs 1972, p. 41) which means that it is mainly the media which makes it interesting through excessively reporting about it. If the problem is “dramatic and exciting” (Downs 1972, p. 42), it will stay in the public eye and not go through the cycle. Regarding sexual harassment and violence, arguments about gender inequalities at the workplace and in private started some decades ago and hence the topic is not overly exciting anymore, but new events reignite the indignation, especially by women.

Even though not all of the criteria might completely apply, it was still possible to observe fluctuating issue-attention when it comes to the issue of sexism. I am aware of the fact that this concept was established for traditional analogue news such as newspapers and magazines and am prepared to make adjustments when necessary so that it fits to contemporary media.

3.2. News Framing, Agenda Setting, and Priming

The issue-attention theory by Downs (1972) traces back to theories about framing, agenda setting, and priming which provide an explanation why certain issues are chosen to be covered by the media while others do not seem to be as ‘newsworthy’, and how that can influence public opinion.

News Framing

The concept of framing is “based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences” (Scheufele & Tewksbury 2006, p. 11). It was put forward by Goffman in 1974 who argued that people cannot make sense of the world around them as a whole, which is why they apply frameworks “to classify information and interpret it meaningfully” (Scheufele & Tewksbury 2006, p. 12). It basically means that specific characteristics of news are
highlighted by media representatives which may guide their audience to think about the issue in a certain way. This can happen through the choice of words or pictures the media is focusing on. Framing for journalists becomes a tool “for presenting relatively complex issues […] efficiently and in a way that makes them accessible to lay audiences because they play to existing cognitive schemas” (Scheufele & Tewksbury 2006, p. 12). Therefore, journalists do not intend to manipulate their audience normally, but try to tell the story in the most interesting – but in our modern times also “click”-worthy – way.

**Agenda Setting**

The way in which mass media choses to cover a topic and therefore passes on information to the public is how media set the “agenda” (Scheufele & Tewksbury 2006, p. 11). Here it is important to point out that “agenda” in this case does not mean that news organization strictly follow a specific order to achieve a determined goal, but “the media agenda presented to the public results from countless day-to-day decisions by many journalists and their supervisors about the news of the moment” (McCombs 2002, p. 2). Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972) use the example of politicians to explain the effect that mass media has when it comes to elections: “The mass media force attention to certain issues”, issues they often subjectively find to be important and newsworthy, and they also draw a certain image of public or political figures with the way they produce news and provide information (McCombs & Shaw 1972, p. 177).

**Priming**

Priming often is referred to as an extension of agenda setting (Scheufele & Tewksbury 2006, p. 11). It “occurs when news content suggests to news audiences that they ought to use specific issues as benchmarks for evaluating the performance of leaders and governments” (Scheufele & Tewksbury 2006, p. 11). While agenda setting is the practice of giving certain issues more importance and coverage and therefore the public is guided to also believe these issues to be very important, priming means that the media influences public opinion “when making judgements about political candidates or issues” (Scheufele & Tewksbury 2006, p. 11).

### 3.3. News Values and Selection

Researchers have long been interested in the kind of news people working in the media sector, such as journalists, found to be important to report about. O’Neill and Harcup (2009, p. 162) explain that the decisions about which topics or events are news-worthy or not is not necessarily made through objective eyes, but the subjective feeling of journalists who try to find the most interesting cases, seemingly most interesting to them and what they assume might make the strongest impression on their audience. Stuart Hall (1973, p. 181, ref. in O’Neill and Harcup) describes news values as “opaque structures of meaning in modern society” as the small selection that makes it into ‘news’ does not live up to the many events that happen on a daily basis and therefore
the media becomes un-transparent and rather “represents the world […] then reflect it” (O’Neill & Harcup 2009, p. 163). Journalists become storytellers who describe events in the most interesting and appealing way to their different audiences. Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge (1965, p. 70-71) created a list of twelve factors that, when fulfilled, make events most likely to be covered as news by media representatives.

These factors are:


Harcup and O’Neill (2001, p. 279) challenged Galtung and Ruge’s (1965) theory when they applied the twelve factors on 1,200 news stories in the UK and created an updated set of news values. According to them, one or more of these ten criteria have to be fulfilled so that an event will be covered by the media:


However, further research is necessary to find out to which extent these new criteria apply (O’Neill & Harcup 2009, p. 168).

While some theories about news values exist, they do not completely explain the selection process made by journalists regarding what becomes news, as O’Neill and Harcup (2009, p. 168) argue. Important here is to point out that research about news values often focus on how news is treated instead of “the actual process of news selection” (Staab, 1990, p. 428, ref. in O’Neill & Harcup 2009, p. 168). For the selection it is important to consider the psychology behind journalistic decisions (Donsbach 2004, ref. in O’Neill & Harcup 2009, p. 168).

4. Literature Review: Research Landscape and Contribution to the Field

In this section, I will draw on existing research in the field of hashtag activism as well as the use of the “issue-attention cycle” theory to show how the field was addressed in previous studies and to argue for my research approach. I will review what inspired my study objective and why I chose this specific way to conduct my case study.

4.1. Hashtags to Spread the Word

Hashtags and hashtag activism are fairly new phenomena. Even though some written pieces about the phenomena exist, the field is still emerging and new studies about it are being conducted. One case study that inspired me for my thesis is the work of Rosemary
Clark (2016) called “‘Hope in a hashtag’: the discursive activism of #WhyIStayed” in which she analyzed the hashtag #WhyIStayed and who and how people made use of it with a theoretical framework. The hashtag was used by women and men who experienced domestic violence to explain why they did not leave their abusers. It emerged in response to an incident with a football player who abused his wife, who instead of leaving decided to marry him (Clark 2016, p. 7). With her work, Clark (2016, p. 1) wants to contribute to a question which in her opinion is still understudied: “What is the process through which a feminist hashtag develops into a highly visible protest?” To analyze that, Clark (2016, p. 2) draws on “concepts of social drama, discursive activism, and connective action […] to outline an analytical framework that captures hashtag feminism’s dramatic features.” She looked at Twitter posts including the hashtag and sorted them out, which I find very useful and which inspired me to include such a content analysis in my thesis. Working out the question of how a hashtag becomes a protest online was intriguing to me, and since there are more and more protests emerging through hashtags online, I am looking at #MeToo, one of the most recent ones that created a sensation and analyze its lifecycle in terms of issue-attention. Furthermore, the theoretical framework that Clark (2016, p. 6) makes use of, McFarland’s theory of social drama which consists of breach, crisis, and reintegration, can be compared to the stages of attention created by Downs (1972) as they also indicate a beginning, middle, and end of media attention, and are therefore similar to the plot elements that Clark (2016, p. 6) mentions.

Researching for more studies on hashtag activism on the Malmö University Library website as well as on Google Scholar, I found some recent publications addressing this topic. Hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter and #Ferguson are being analyzed through rhetorical agency (Yang 2016) or through a combination of a linguistic anthropology and social movements research approach (Bonilla and Rosa 2015). Guobin Yang (2016, p. 13) states that “hashtag activism happens when large numbers of postings appear on social media under a common hashtagged word, phrase or sentence with a social or political claim” and states that “the temporal unfolding of these mutually connected postings in networked spaces gives them a narrative form and agency”. Arguing for this narrative form, Yang (2016, p. 15) searched for the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on Twitter, saved a 74-page document of results and explains that on the one hand the “communal and participatory feature of agency is evident from the many likes and retweets of individual postings” and on the other hand that “#BlackLivesMatter is the result of […] a process of skillful invention”, with invention being another feature of agency. He also cites Clark (2016) in his work who looks at the narrative form of hashtags and, similar to Yang (2016), analyzes several Twitter posts. The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was first posted as a reaction against police brutality to the shooting of African American teenager Trayvon Martin in 2013 (Yang 2016). The hashtag #Ferguson which Bonilla and Rosa (2015, p. 5) address in their work also was a reaction to police brutality against African Americans after the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, which went viral on Twitter as the hashtag was used more than eight million times. With an ethnographic approach, Bonilla and Rosa (2015,
p. 6) compare hashtags to call numbers in libraries: “It is in this sense that much like one could go to the library, stand in front of a call number, and find texts on a particular subject, one could go onto Twitter, type #Ferguson, and find a large number of posts on the subject at hand.” Therefore, they describe Twitter as a mediatized place (Bonilla & Rosa 2015, p. 6). It means that content is more or less archived on Twitter and can be retrieved through hashtags. This archive function is an important aspect to consider in an issue-attention model as the re-circulation of earlier posts under a hashtag influence it.

4.2. Media in the “Issue-Attention Cycle”

The concept has been tested out many times on the media already. Topics that were addressed include climate change (McDonald 2009, Lörcher & Neverla 2015) and terrorism attacks (Petersen 2009, Hall 2002), incidents that regularly pop up in the media, create a stir for a while, and then disappear again. Even though Downs (1972) introduced it almost 50 years ago, the stages of the “issue-attention cycle” still find recognition today as they are used as a basis for understanding media structures and agenda setting, even though they might need modifications to fit current news.

In her work, McDonald (2009, p. 45) applies “knowledge from 30 years of literature on media effects and public opinion to the issue of climate change” and examines among other topics what role the concept of the issue-attention cycle plays on this recurring issue. Hence, she wants to find out how global warming is perceived by the general public. In addition, she looks at ways in which public attention to this serious topic might be increased through more information. When she researched for her study in 2009, she argues that climate change was on the rise for the third time in the issue-attention cycle (p. 54) and connects it to Downs’ (1972) notion that a major problem reoccurs in the media from time to time when it is connected to another current event. In 2009, it was the linkage of climate change to natural disasters (McDonald 2009, p. 54). Addressing the question if climate change will remain in the public eye, McDonald (2009, p. 55) concludes that “the longevity of climate change in maintaining public interest will depend in part on the effectiveness of framers and information providers in terms of communicating the threat in a way that is visible, universal, and at least somewhat fixable.” Even though some developments on this globe can clearly be linked to a change in the climate, it is difficult to render the problem visible which is why media coverage and public interest continue to flare up and fade again.

A topic that might be more visible and graspable than climate change is terrorism. Karen Petersen (2009) applies the issue-attention cycle on this topic in her work “Revisiting Downs’ Issue-Attention Cycle: International Terrorism and U.S. Public Opinion”. She analyzes why the public supports easy actions by policy makers when it comes to such an important topic. Petersen (2009) shows how media coverage on terrorism was at its peak when the terror attack on September 11th, 2001 shook the United States of America. By 2007, media articles on international terrorism reduced
dramatically (Petersen 2009, p. 9). This trend “appears to conform to the issue-attention cycle theoretically […] and empirically with respect to media coverage” (Petersen 2009, p. 9). She suggests only a minor modification to the concept, namely to change the asymmetry of information to asymmetry of understanding in stage three as nowadays people have more access to a broad variety of information, but it is the lack of education that leads to less understanding of international issues in the United States (Petersen 2009, p. 10).

So far, the problem of international terrorism seems to conform with Down’s issue-attention cycle. Only if the public understood the problems more, policymakers would be able to take actions that are strong and meaningful instead of simple solutions. Petersen’s (2009) approach to use the issue-attention cycle to international terrorism is similar to what I am aiming to demonstrate. She applied all the stages to this topic and created a modified version of the cycle that suits her research topic.

C. Michael Hall (2002) also applied the issue-attention theory to terrorism alongside with tourism in his work “Travel Safety, Terrorism and the Media: The Significance of the Issue-Attention Cycle”. One year after the September 11 attacks, Hall (2002) analyzes how tourism changes and what role the media plays. He concludes that the media not only influences tourism, but that it “also has a substantial impact on the policy measures which governments take with respect to tourist safety and security” (Hall 2002, p. 463). If the issue receives less attention, the willingness of policymakers to adopt security measures will fade as well (Hall 2002, p. 458).

A work that included social media to find out about the dynamics of issue-attention in online communication is “The Dynamics of Issue Attention in Online Communication on Climate Change” by Lörcher and Neverla (2015). Their research object also is similar to what I am seeking to find out: the authors looked at what dynamics of attention climate change receives in the German online sphere. Looking at “journalistic articles and their readers’ comments, scientific expert blogs, discussion forums and social media” (Lörcher & Neverla 2015, p. 17) they found out that there is “more continuous issue attention in journalistic media, compared to a public arena where everyone can communicate” (Lörcher & Neverla 2015, p. 17). Instead of talking of a cycle, they prefer to use the term ‘dynamics’ as it does not indicate an end, as it is the case with a cycle, and therefore it is more suitable to phenomena such as comments or posts (Lörcher & Neverla 2015, p. 18). Even though I do not completely agree with the explanation that a cycle indicates an end, whereas it is the ultimate symbol for eternity and endlessness, it also makes sense to talk about dynamics instead of a cycle in this work. The reason for that will be explained in the analysis and findings section.

Annie Waldherr (2014) makes another important contribution to the study of issue-attention. In her article “Emergence of News Waves: A Social Simulation Approach” she applies a computer simulation integrating agents and actors that lead to news waves to show how these are produced. Her results reveal that the main driver of these news waves is the journalistic reporting behavior. Unfortunately, I do not have the know-how to also create such a simulation for this thesis which would be very intriguing,
especially since it is created for media arenas without addressing the audience, and hence if applied on online media it would need more variables (Waldherr 2014, p. 869). Therefore, I will work with Waldherr’s (2014) models and findings and apply them to my research.

Very similar to what I am aiming for in this thesis is Ilona Grzywinska’s and Jonathan Borden’s (2012, p. 1) study “The impact of social media on traditional media agenda setting theory – the case study of Occupy Wall Street Movement in USA” in which the authors focus “on the impact of social media on agenda building and agenda setting in traditional media.” Doing so, they also look at the way in which agenda building leads to changes in the issue-attention cycle. Their focus on agenda-setting of social media helps me to argue why it is important to take that into account when speaking of the general public and public media. Compared to their study, I will focus on the social medium Twitter and how hashtags influence the importance of topics and accordingly will adjust the existing issue-attention which was created for traditional media.

The research field is very broad when it comes to media and its impact and influence on the public, as well as the longevity of media attention on certain topics. There are several works that address social movements in the media (Andrews & Caren 2010; Shugart et al. 2001; Gamson & Wolfsfeld 1993; Lim 2012; to name a few). As I am specifically focusing on hashtags and the issue-attention theory, I did not address all of the studies about social movements and the importance of their media coverage as this would have been overwhelming for the scope of this thesis. However, many of these works focus on the changes that media coverage of these movements achieved. This could be an interesting research objective regarding #MeToo when its ultimate impact and changes become visible.

5. Methodology

For this thesis, I chose to conduct interviews with experts on the #MeToo debate in Germany to see how much attention it has received after about half a year of media coverage, and to find out how this form of hashtag activism is perceived in Germany. In addition to that, I carried out a content analysis of Twitter posts by four major German newspapers to see where the debate is going now, which also helps me finding out if and how the issue-attention model works here. While interviews make for good qualitative data, the content analysis of Twitter posts makes for quantitative data. I tested out the interview method in the Research Methodology course and therefore refer to my final assignment in the research paradigm and ethics section, as well as the methodology section about interviews (Hoffmann 2018).
5.1. Research Paradigms

The paradigm I chose for this project is the pragmatic paradigm as it “places ‘the research problem’ as central and applies all approaches to understanding the problem” (Creswell, 2003, p.11, in Mackenzie & Knipe 2006, p. 5). The research methods were shaped around the research problem as it was central, just as the pragmatic paradigm states. Therefore, I prepared questions for my interviews and chose the semi-structured approach to an unstructured one as I wanted to make sure that the conversations stuck to the topic.

To distinguish between experts and regular Twitter users, I am referring to the definition described by Meuser and Nagel:

[…] an individual is addressed as an expert because the researcher assumes – for whatever reason – that she or he has knowledge, which she or he may not necessarily possess alone, but which is not accessible to anybody in the field of action under study. (Meuser & Nagel 2009, p. 19)

I am assuming that the experts I interviewed have specific knowledge about the hashtag phenomenon #MeToo within their field of expertise as they have previously acted as sources of information on this topic. Even though experts might try to take an objective stance, I was particularly asking about what they found out and experienced subjectively. Their contributions supplemented my own data set and provided me with facts and information to which I might not otherwise have access. That said, as I only interviewed one person from each field, they do not represent the opinion of everyone within their fields.

As the paradigm “provides the underlying philosophical framework for mixed-methods” (Mackenzie & Knipe 2006, p. 4), I am able to use a qualitative method, the expert interviews, and a quantitative method, the content analysis of Twitter posts. The research problem also is central to the content analysis of Twitter posts as it serves as the basis from which I drew my analysis on.

With the “issue-attention cycle” theory and my research question central to my research, I chose the theoretical or deductive approach to identify themes and therefore “a more detailed analysis of some aspect of the data” (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 83) instead of looking at all the data that I gathered.

5.2. Content Analysis of Twitter posts

I chose to do a content analysis of Twitter posts by German newspapers to find out about the lifecycle of the hashtag, and in which stage of the “issue-attention cycle” the #MeToo campaign can currently be placed. Content analyses have been conducted in several studies as it is “a method of analysing written, verbal or visual communication messages” (Cole 1988, ref. in Elo & Kyngäs 2008). It is very suitable to my research objective as it “is used in social science to describe phenomena, to observe their
interrelationships, and to make predictions about those interrelationships” (Riffe et al. 2014, p. 32). Through this method I want to provide an understanding of this specific hashtag phenomenon. To do so, I will look at all the posts made by four major German newspapers that included the #MeToo hashtag from the very start up until now and therefore make assumptions on its lifecycle and the meaning of hashtag activism in Germany. The results will then be connected to the issue-attention theory.

Strengths and weaknesses of content analysis

In Analyzing Media Messages – Using Quantitative Content Analysis in Research, Daniel Riffe et al. (2014) mention several advantages of the method. First, “it is a nonobtrusive, nonreactive measurement technique” (p. 30) which means that compared to e.g. interviews, no real people are involved but only the media messages using the theory the researcher wants to test out. Second, long-term studies are possible due to the fact that “content often has a life beyond its production and consumption” (Riffe et al. 2014, p. 30). The researcher can work with archived material. Third, content analysis uses codes or terms that organize the amount of information collected which would not be possible for a qualitative method. Lastly, content analysis is not restricted to a certain kind of research field or question but can be used by many research disciplines (Riffe et al. 2014, p. 30).

Critics argue that quantitative content analysis can be superficial if the researcher just cares for the amount of data instead of also the quality. Such research might be trivial. However, any study can be superficial if the researcher does not put enough emphasis to the study (Riffe et al. 2014, p. 28).

Similar to thematic analysis for my interviews, categories, or codes, are important to sort out the Twitter posts I am going to look at to limit the amount of data. These will be connected to the issue-attention cycle.

5.2.1. Sample

The newspapers I considered for this project are Zeit Online, BILD, Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ), and WELT. I picked these four specifically to represent how the hashtag has circulated in German online media. As these are the newspapers with the most followers on Twitter, they can tell a lot about the German media landscape (Playa Games, Twitter-Ranking). The four newspapers have different audiences: Zeit Online has, compared to the print version, a younger audience and therefore there is a different emphasis on topics online (https://www.eurotopics.net/de/148870/zeit-online#). BILD is about sensations with many pictures and headlines, written in an easy understandable style. It is regarded as tabloid press (https://www.eurotopics.net/de/148423/bild). Even though the headlines often are sensational, people are being informed about what is going on in the world. Süddeutsche Zeitung is described as independent and opinion-forming (Deutschland.de 2018), and WELT is considered as bourgeois-conservative and
offers strong analyses and comments to its readers seven days a week (Deutschland.de 2018).

The reason I looked at newspapers in particular is that traditional media such as these used to set the agenda. However, with social media there can be a shift and a correlation of who sets the agenda: either traditional media in their online appearance or social media, which Neuman et al. (2014) found out after analyzing 29 political issues on social media and traditional media respectively during the year of 2012. #MeToo was born on social media, but it was traditional media that let the debate travel to a broader audience.

In summary and to provide an overview, my sample looks as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Political Orientation</th>
<th>Followers on Twitter in million</th>
<th>Total number of posts with #MeToo</th>
<th>Last post with #MeToo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ZEIT Online</td>
<td>liberal</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>24.06.2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BILD</td>
<td>conservative</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13.03.2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SZ</td>
<td>left-liberal</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>21.05.2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WELT</td>
<td>conservative</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>08.05.2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.2.2. Approach

To collect a representative amount of Twitter posts for the scope of this thesis, I looked at all posts made on #MeToo by four big German newspapers that have a respectable number of followers on Twitter. To argue for my choice of newspapers, I looked at a Twitter ranking of Twitter accounts with the most followers in Germany (Playa Games, Twitter-Ranking). Sorting out the newspapers that appeared in this list, I decided to pick those which had at least one million followers on Twitter. With such a big number of followers I assumed the level of attention for their posts to be rather high.

After that, I used Twitter’s standard search API where I looked at all #MeToo posts made by these newspapers from October 2017 to July 7, 2018.

I included the data in a timeline to make highs and lows of the attention on #MeToo more visible. This way I can argue for the lifecycle and find out what it demonstrates about hashtag activism in Germany. I summarized the number of posts of all dates in a graph and created another graph with the number of posts per month.

---

Information from eurotopics.net:
https://www.eurotopics.net/de/148870/zeit-online
https://www.eurotopics.net/de/148423/bild
https://www.eurotopics.net/de/148780/sueddeutsche-zeitung#
https://www.eurotopics.net/de/148503/die-welt

Last post when checked the last time, on July 7, 2018.
I evaluated my findings due to the following categories:

1. Days with the most posts
2. Content of posts on days with the most posts
3. Frequency of posts on #MeToo
4. Last post on #MeToo

In addition to that I looked at what these newspapers posted under hashtags addressing sexism in Germany that preceded #MeToo. Therefore, I looked at the hashtags #aufschrei, #ausnahmslos, and #neinheißtnein and also collected all the dates in a timeline. Since these were created some years ago I decided to include my findings in graphs with the number of posts per year until now.

5.3. **Qualitative Expert Interviews**

Conducting interviews in person is the best way to gain an insight into how people feel about certain topics. Not only is the researcher able to find out about concerns or biases, but also to see it when observing the body language of the interviewee while they hold a conversation, a “basic mode of human interaction” (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009, p. xvii).

I chose a semi-structured approach for the qualitative expert interviews which is, as Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p. 3) define it, “an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena.” I prepared some questions but also gave my interviewees the possibility “to express themselves at length” (Collins 2010, p. 134). I conducted research interviews “where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee” (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009, p.2). In these interviews the researcher and the interviewee are not equal, “because the researcher controls and defines the situation” (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009, p. 3) by the kind of questions they ask, especially if it is no unstructured interview. For this thesis I chose prepared questions over completely open interviews to make sure that the conversation does not go off-topic, and to avoid transcribing less useful information.

**Strengths and weaknesses of qualitative expert interviews**

Opdenakker (2006) characterizes oral interviews as “synchronous communication of time and place” with the advantage that the interviewer can find out more about the interviewee by analyzing his body language and voice. However, this advantage becomes a disadvantage when the behavior of the interviewer influences the behavior of the interviewees in a way (Opdenakker 2006). Moreover, another advantage of face-to-face interviews is that the interviewee can answer spontaneously and at length. It is important that the interviewer pays attention to the interviewee’s answers so that they can ask to elaborate on it. In written interviews, such as e-mail interviews, interviewees might only give short and less detailed answers. Apart from that, the interviewer has not the possibility to observe the interviewee’s body language when the interview is not face-to-face and therefore might miss some interesting information.
Expert interviews specifically are “a more efficient and concentrated method of gathering data than, for instance, participatory observation or systematic quantitative surveys” (Bogner, Littig, & Menz 2009, p. 2). In a comparatively short amount of time the researcher can collect good and valuable data. This form of data collection also has weaknesses as it “lacks standardization and quantification of the data” (Bogner & Menz 2009, p. 44) and the guided form through semi-structured interviews makes the collected data less ‘pure’ (Bogner & Menz 2009, p. 44).

5.3.1. Sample

The people who were willing to be interviewed all have an expertise in different fields which I find very revealing. I gained insights from a sociologist, a political scientist, a media scientist, a journalist, and a social media monitoring expert. Since it is only one expert from their fields respectively, I do not assume that they speak for the entire field. However, these different perspectives made me look at the #MeToo debate from different angles and helped me in arguing for its issue-attention dynamics as well as its impact.

In summary, my sample is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>University/Company</th>
<th>Field of Expertise</th>
<th>Interview Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Ronny Patz</td>
<td>Research Assistant</td>
<td>Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich</td>
<td>Political Science</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prof. Dr. Paula-Irene Villa</td>
<td>Sociologist</td>
<td>Ludwig Maximilians-University Munich</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(WhatsApp)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prof. Dr. Stefan Münker</td>
<td>Media Scientist</td>
<td>Humboldt University Berlin</td>
<td>Media Science</td>
<td>E-Mail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and Culture Journalist</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hilde Buder-Monath</td>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>ZDF zoom</td>
<td>Journalism/TV Production</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel Köthe</td>
<td>Marketing Manager</td>
<td>Talkwalker</td>
<td>Social Media</td>
<td>E-Mail</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.3.2. Approach

To start, I researched for experts and activists on #MeToo online and contacted people who either already gave interviews about that topic, or were otherwise engaged with it, assuming that this is proof for their expertise on this field. I found the sociologist, research assistant and media scientist in articles by different news platforms where they had already given interviews about #MeToo (Brigitte 2018; Vahabzadeh 2017; Uenning 2017). I contacted all of them via e-mail in which I introduced myself and explained the aim of my thesis. Luckily all of them gave me a positive reply. I also emailed the journalist from ZDF whose short film about #MeToo I saw on TV (ZDFzoom 2018), and the social media monitoring company that was mentioned in the contribution (Talkwalker). Since I am living abroad but doing my research about Germany I was not able to talk to my interviewees face-to-face, but via Skype, telephone and e-mail. As
mentioned before, the interview form I aimed for was a semi-structured one: I asked prepared questions but also generated follow-up questions to information that would come up during the interviews.

The interviews were held in German. I did transcriptions of them and translated them into English. I tried my best to come as close to the original as possible to keep the risk of ethical issues to a minimum. All participants were asked if I could include their name in my work or if they wanted to stay anonymous, and all of them agreed to be named in my study. The transcripts are available upon request.

5.4. Ethical Issues

There are some ethical issues that need to be considered. In terms of interviews, these are the principle of informed consent, protecting participants’ interests, and confidentiality and anonymity (Layder 2013).

Informed consent basically affects many research methods. It makes sure that participants as well as other people involved in the research are fully informed of what the method is used for and why (Layder 2013). People must not be manipulated or forced to something they not intend to do, and potential risks must be explained. Furthermore, participants can always “withdraw from the research at any time if they change their mind and should be reassured that their withdrawal will have no negative consequences for them“ (Layder 2013, chpt. 1).

Furthermore, the interests of the participants need to be protected, and their privacy respected (Layder 2013).

Confidentiality and anonymity are especially important in interviews (Layder 2013). Names should only be published if the participant agrees to that, and the researcher always needs to ask if they want to be named in the work or not. If the participants do not want their names to be published for any reason, the researcher must respect it. Instead of their real names, pseudonyms or fictitious names can then be used (Layder 2013). Since the confidentiality of the participants needs to be protected, the question might occur if a transcribed interview “is loyal to the interviewee’s oral statements” (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009, p. 63). Therefore, researchers should cite their interviewees in their original tone and not change it to make it fit their intentions.

For content analysis, trustworthiness is important: “The analysis process and the results should be described in sufficient detail so that readers have a clear understanding of how the analysis was carried out and its strengths and limitations (GAO 1996)” (Elo & Kyngäs 2008, p. 112). To guide the reader through every step and to make all data and results visible, appendices and tables are appreciated (Elo & Kyngäs 2008, p. 112).

To make the aim of my thesis clear, I introduced myself and explained the objective of my research to the interviewees in a mail. During the interview, I asked all participants
if they were fine with recording and also publishing their names in my thesis and everyone agreed to that. When transcribing the interviews, I tried to be as close to the original language as possible. However, I did ignore some fillers such as ‘well’, ‘so to speak’, so that the transcript becomes clearer to read. These adjustments were only made to a minimum, and many fillers do still appear in the texts. I also tried to stick as close to the original speech when translating statements into English. Regarding the content analysis, I included graphs all the way in my thesis, as Elo and Kyngäs (2008) suggested, as well as information and data of my content analysis in the appendixes, so that the reader can follow every step.

6. Findings and Analysis

The findings of the content analysis as well as of the interview information help me answer my first research question: “What have been the attention dynamics in the lifecycle of the hashtag #MeToo in German online news media and what does this demonstrate about the relationship between mainstream media and hashtag activism in Germany?" which will then, with the concept of the issue-attention cycle applied, help to solve the second research question: “What can the media coverage of #MeToo tell us about issue-attention of social movements on Twitter and on the other hand, how can the issue-attention theory help us understand #MeToo?"

6.1. Findings of Content Analysis

The timeline with all posts on Twitter by the four newspapers shows that in the beginning of the debate, in October 2017, the interest especially of Zeit Online and SZ was higher as they had the most posts on #MeToo (see fig. 1). WELT also seemed to post more frequently, whereas BILD was, up until now, not so much interested in the discussion at all. This might be due to the fact that this newspaper does not really aim for opinion-making or activist engagements of their readers, but rather scandals and chitchat. In the beginning of November there are still some more posts by the four newspapers, but it recedes towards the end of the month. In December it seemed to flare
up again, but the most frequent posts were in the beginning of 2018. Not only did WELT and SZ post more per day, but all four newspapers posted more frequently on #MeToo. Beginning on 8 January, this lasted until approximately the end of February. From then on there is only Zeit Online left which still seems to post on #MeToo on a regular basis.

To show how often the newspapers had posted with #MeToo in total, I created a Pivot table using Microsoft’s Excel (see fig. 2). With 70 posts, Zeit Online posted the most, followed by SZ with 65. WELT only mentioned #MeToo 32 times and BILD with very little interest in the topic only 5 times in total.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zeilenbeschriftungen</th>
<th>Summe von ZEIT Online</th>
<th>Summe von BILD</th>
<th>Summe von SZ</th>
<th>Summe von WELT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qrtl4</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okt</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dez</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qrtl2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mai</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qrtl3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jul</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gesamtergebnis</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Number of posts on #MeToo by newspapers in total.
To make highs and lows of attention even more visible, I also created a diagram showing the frequency of posts by all newspapers per month (see fig. 3). Here it becomes even more obvious that the debate received the most attention by the newspapers online when the debate started in October 2017, and in January 2018.

![Number of Twitter posts on #MeToo by German Newspapers per month](image)

*Figure 3: Number of Twitter posts on #MeToo by German newspapers per month.*

I looked back at the posts in months/days with the highest frequency of posts by the newspapers to see the events that lead to these posts. In October, the posts mainly were about the Weinstein scandal that led to the hashtag. After the frequency of posts dropped a little towards the end of the year, it increased again in January 2018. Reason for that is the reaction of 100 French women, among them actress Catherine Deneuve, who criticized the #MeToo debate as a discussion that would lead to the hatred of men and against sexual freedom (Süddeutsche Zeitung 2018). Also, quite frequently addressed was the German film producer Dieter Wedel who was accused of inappropriate sexual actions towards women (Mayer 2018).
Since the issue-attention cycle looks at an issue as a whole, e.g. global warming, and the events that bring the issue to the center of attention again, for example with new decisions or scandals that arise, I wanted to take a closer look at debates about sexism in Germany. However, since I am focusing on the online aspects of this discussion, hashtags on Twitter in particular, I researched for the most attention-grabbing hashtags that had been created and bring them in relation with the #MeToo movement. One hashtag that compared to #MeToo was created in Germany, was #aufschrei. Through my research as well as from my interview participants I learned that this also received a lot of attention by the media. Since this hashtag was created a few years ago, in 2013, I also found it intriguing to see how often it has been posted by the same newspapers. I looked for #aufschrei after such a large amount of time to also make assumptions on #MeToo. I noticed that #aufschrei was very strong when it originated in 2013, but then the attention receded from 2014 onwards (see fig. 4). Interestingly, the number of posts within a timeframe of five years here is still less than in about half a year of news coverage on #MeToo. Zeit Online which has posted around 70 times on #MeToo only posted 15 times on #aufschrei, SZ which posted 65 times on #MeToo posted 27 times on #aufschrei (see fig. 5). The background is very similar: both hashtags are about sexual harassment, and #aufschrei had already led to discussions in Germany, but with #MeToo it seemed like they never took place before. The most recent posts on #aufschrei in 2017 were connected to #MeToo. In total, in five years #aufschrei was mentioned by all newspapers 57 times.

Figure 4: Number of Twitter posts on #aufschrei by German newspapers per year.

![Chart showing number of Twitter posts on #aufschrei by German newspapers per year.](image-url)
Two other hashtags created for the same problem that is sexual harassment and violence were #ausnahmslos and #neinheißtnein. Both emerged in 2016; #ausnahmslos at the very beginning and #neinheißtnein later in the year. While both also already reminded of #aufschrei and the issue of sexism in Germany again, there was only one post on #ausnahmslos by Zeit Online, SZ, and WELT while BILD did not mention it (see fig. 6), and only a couple on #neinheißtnein, with BILD and WELT not mentioning it on Twitter at all (see fig. 7).

However, the controversial case that gave rise to the hashtag #neinheißtnein led to an addition to the existing law on sexual harassment clearly stating now that a simple “no” is enough to argue in court that a sexual encounter was not intended by a possible victim, even though she or he did not actively react against it, e.g. by fighting with the perpetrator (UN WOMEN 2016).
Meaning

The comparison of #MeToo to preceding hashtag campaigns in Germany shows that hashtags “made in Hollywood” receive far more attention, more intense and for a longer, continued period of time. This makes sense as especially the film making industry of Hollywood is in the center of public eye all over the world, while at the same time it is a pity that a hashtag originating in Germany that focuses on the very same issue does not seem to have the same potential. On the other hand, the debates in 2016 led to a change of the law nevertheless. As this research stopped looking at posts on July 7, 2018, it cannot be predicted how long the #MeToo debate will go on, and how often these newspapers will focus on it, even though it might be less regular than it was in the beginning.

6.2. Findings and Analysis of Interviews

In order to analyze and organize my interview material, I chose to use thematic analysis which is “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 79). Thematic analysis can be used in many ways as it is not tied to specific theories or frameworks. I also looked at “A Pragmatic View of Thematic Analysis” by Jodi Aronson (1995) for thematic analysis. To create suitable themes, I looked at the questions I asked my interviewees as well as the interview data and the answers they gave me. Overarching themes I found were: The Significance of Hashtag Activism, #MeToo and its Attention, The Role of the Media, and Impact of #MeToo.
The Significance of Hashtag Activism

HashTags connect people regardless of their social status

An advantage of hashtags on Twitter and their content is that they are accessible to almost everybody. Smartphones are not very expensive anymore and platforms like Twitter are free of charge, so it does not take much to engage in these conversations and to receive information.

The pace is of course very crucial, and social media and especially Twitter and hashtags are extreme, with only little premise in their usability. Unlike other media, especially of analogue kind, that is magazines or long texts or something like that, it does not take much – neither money nor time to read, or competence, or access to certain books or texts […] (Dr. Paula-Irene Villa)

Posting #MeToo does not only have to be in an activist manner, but people can use it to expedite a topic. That is a way in which one of my interviewees engages in Twitter conversations:

I myself use hashtags in an activist matter, above all to take part in conversations, that do not directly have to do with me. […] through using #MeToo, I can assume that everybody who is interested in this topic at that moment is able to also read my contribution if they like to, and that is not supposed to be so activist necessarily, but still it is an attempt to take part in conversations that go beyond the direct circle of friends and acquaintances, circle of followers, or howsoever. (Dr. Ronny Patz)

Hashtag is only a connector

It is important to not forget that the hashtag itself does not do so much but connect and spread information.

Hashtags are a good means to depict trends, opinions, and tendencies. But also to spread decisions and news. (Daniel Köthe)

In the case of #MeToo in Germany, it led once more to questioning gender inequalities, but the journalist as well as the media scientist I interviewed uttered skepticism towards the power one could ascribe the hashtag itself:

This being the case, the hashtag alone doesn’t do anything. Principally, it is a societal change which hopefully continues and ultimately leads to that there are no differences in treating of the genders anymore and that there really is equality and respect for all, from all. But the debate certainly was such an accelerator, a fire accelerator so to say. (Hilde Buder-Monath)

A hashtag is “only” an attention grabber, no contention. You cannot convince with it, it is shared by those who already had the same opinion before. (Dr. Stefan Münker)

Success of hashtag cannot be planned

Arguing for the lifecycle of hashtags, in this case #MeToo, there never is the guarantee that one works as well as the other. The circumstances, time, and people play an
important role. As also viewed in the content analysis, #aufschrei, #ausnahmslos, and #neinheißtnein did not lead to such a big discussion as the Weinstein affair did. The American film industry and its actors and actresses are very much in the public eye all over the world. It makes sense that as soon as something happens in their circles, many people will be interested in it.

The problem with such things is [...] those are things that are not planned like this. Most things do not work because you contemplate for a month over big campaigns, but in this case it is made aware of an issue, that seethes already anyway, to the right time, and suddenly a hashtag [...] which is short enough and catchy enough to work well, becomes big [...]. Everything else are dynamics, which, I believe, nobody ever really plans and [...] the thoughts of #MeToo had already existed for a long time [...] but only with the press and attention right now it became big. (Dr. Ronny Patz)

This hashtag was so powerful and so effective because it was not made in this sense, but it grew [...]. I believe it often is these things that are so unintentional that then unfold their own power. (Hilde Buder-Monath)

That being the case, one could argue that a hashtag that originated in Germany might never have the same effect as a hashtag that was spread by a worldwide known American actress, as the comparison between the hashtag #aufschrei in the content analysis also showed.

#MeToo and its Attention

All my interviewees except for one had the opinion that the level of attention for #MeToo receded, that the hashtag is even almost gone now, but the effect it has had on society would stay.

I have the feeling that the hashtag might not have the spike anymore which it received with the main media attention, but that aspects of #MeToo are now discussed in all social areas. Right now the central #MeToo debate has backtracked to its social room again, so to say, but there the change lives on, and it will grow big again, or even bigger, when the changes, that are now moving in smaller spaces, are not happening, and when the things that piled up now and exploded in the #MeToo-year, will pile up again [...]. (Dr. Ronny Patz)

I think the issue is over, well, I do not have the impression that there is a lot of talk about #MeToo right now [...]. I think it has been reported about it over half a year until approximately one month ago, it is also still reported about it here and there, but it does not have the same visibility since a few weeks I would say. (Dr. Paula-Irene Villa)

I think it definitely left an impression in the minds of the people that will not go away. I cannot imagine that it will continue with the same intensity. It is always like this in our media world, there are always topics which will alternate this topic and that is okay, it may do that [...] but I don’t believe that we will return to the state from before October 2017 consciousness-wise [...]. It was too intense for that
and too many people became aware of it. It really got to all social classes, it also
got to boards, it actually got everywhere. (Hilde Buder-Monath)

I have the feeling that the debate around the hashtag receded by now — although the
debate of sexual violence/abuse will continue […]. The debate undoubtedly
brought the topic in the center of public discourse. If the attention will last however
cannot be reliably predicted. (Dr. Stefan Münker)

Furthermore, when I asked Mrs. Buder-Monath if the debate was still present at
ZDF, she told me that “it was after the first hype in October, November, it
flattened at first. […] And then towards February I believe, when also the Wedel
case happened […] it again came very strongly to awareness in our company.”
The months in which #MeToo received the most attention that Mrs. Buder-
Monath mentioned conforms to what I found out in my content analysis (see fig.
1-3).

However, asking the social media monitoring manager Daniel Köthe the same question,
he answered that he still sees many posts:

In our monitoring analyses we still see the hashtag on a daily basis. On TV not so
much anymore, but on social media daily, still. (Daniel Köthe)

Compared to the monitoring analysis Mr. Köthe mentioned, the content analysis in this
work showed that the attention by the online presence of the newspapers was receding
as well (see fig. 1-3). With the rather new medium of social media, a trend can live on
much longer than traditional media is willing to report about it. Not only did the debate
start on Twitter, it lives on there through constant retweeting, sharing, and connecting
events and articles through the hashtag #MeToo by people who care when traditional
media does not anymore. It is a means to make aware of something which did not exist
in such a way in pre-social media times. This is an important aspect to take into account
when looking at the issue-attention cycle from a social media perspective.

*The peculiarity of #MeToo*

Asking about the peculiarity of #MeToo, some of my interviewees were sure that it
brought light to the issue of sexism from a different angle than other hashtag campaigns
did before:

I think, #MeToo really was something extraordinary, because it was things which
had not been part of bigger campaigns before, if we abstain from #aufschrei, but
that sank into obscurity again. But #MeToo really was something special because
one had noticed that suddenly many voices are being heard that have not been
heard before. (Hilde Buder-Monath)

The #MeToo debate is the most extraordinary social media movement of the last
year and really only gained so much in meaning due to this hashtag. No other trend
had such a high level of daily and weekly mentions for so long. And it still does not
recede. (Daniel Köthe)
I am also convinced that in this case the hashtag actually activated the debate significantly and kept it alive for a while. (Dr. Stefan Münker)

The short form and catchiness of the hashtag in addition to its famous audience certainly were reasons for its success. One can only predict what will happen in future as right now the hashtag and debate is still not over, and events that are controversial in terms of inequality between men and women will easily trigger new content with the hashtag #MeToo on Twitter.

The Role of the Media

Debate needs to stay in the public media

To not let people forget about the topic again like it happened with previous hashtags campaigns, it is important to at least maintain a part of the attention.

There is the possibility of those who are positioned in the media to open their mouth anytime and I do believe that there can be something done. All of these issues have been defended and fought for by those people, who work with them, for a long time, and the only big change is that those who are in the power of decision are not able to deny the fact anymore that these are not small activist issues, but society issues. (Dr. Ronny Patz)

This can happen in form of TV contributions that go beyond the main peak of the hashtag. This is what Dr. Paula-Irene Villa suggests:

That the issue […] still is an ongoing topic which you cannot forget again and that exactly that is about to come, series which capture that, or longer reports, or a movie, or features which do not only live on headlines and the fast transshipping rate […]. There are now more […] background stories and that it simply is now part of what coverages report about or reference points in crime films […] but that it becomes the texture of the narrative in the media without it being so short-term politically scandalized […]. That could happen now, but we are right in the middle of it. (Dr. Paula-Irene Villa)

Traditional media can only do so much

Talking to the ZDF journalist Hilde Buder-Monath about what the media can or should do in order to keep the debate going, she answers that there are significant differences between hashtag campaigns and traditional media, in this case a public service broadcaster:

Well, social media can of course rather make campaign journalism, we cannot do that. We are a public service broadcaster and for us there are other working rules […]. Therefore, I would say we are not going to dramatically condense the reporting and say we make, I don’t know, something big about it every month or so […] we have a range of topics that we all have to consider and hence we cannot suddenly say we make #MeToo to our main topic, that does not work. (Hilde Buder-Monath)
It seems as it is easier said than done that the traditional media needs to cover these topics more. As Mrs. Buder-Monath states, they need to concentrate on more topics than only focusing on this one. This might also be the reason why the newspapers I addressed in the content analysis covered the topic so differently, and mainly when there seemed to be another newsworthy event. However, as Waldherr (2014, p. 852) explains, news waves are created by journalistic behavior. Journalists often have the power to decide what information counts as important and influence public opinion through agenda setting (McCombs 2002). Therefore, more coverage of certain topics would lead to longer waves and longer attention spans. Big hashtag campaigns could help prolonging that by connecting events with the issue and hence bringing the attention back to it.

**Impact of #MeToo**

Almost all of my interviewees were convinced that the hashtag led to such a high attention level in the topic of sexual harassment that changes might come which could lead to better social interactions. This might start with a better understanding of what is experienced as sexual harassment and better protection in companies in the form of e.g. agencies or ombudspersons.

I think, the big change of #MeToo was that people spoke a lot about sexual harassment and equality in the public, but #MeToo was empowering also in the private space [...]. So after this debate, there is no escape for “anyone” [...] out of the perception that #MeToo is something that affects many in all circles in which we are in. You do not have to convince someone of the credibility of a story anymore but decide how to deal with it [...]. My personal understanding is that the debate actually makes clear that there are negotiation processes between both or all genders that need to take place and then it can happen someday that one can make a compliment to each other, also working colleagues, but it is part of a negotiation process about where are the boundaries and what is accepted. (Dr. Ronny Patz)

But yes, I believe that that is exactly the level which is necessary for the long run and which also certainly partly happens now, it is under this big level of legislation, in a very strong sense, that routines in companies, in associations, in parties, in organizations, in universities as well, are being established to address this issue. So perhaps ombudswomen, ombudspersons to which someone can turn to faithfully, or unions or work councils incorporate it more in their agenda in the sense of rights of female and male employees, that they can turn to someone when it comes to sexual harassment, or that there are trainings and further education concerning consciousness, race in companies or organizations, and that it basically becomes more part of the routine [...]. (Dr. Paula-Irene Villa)

Even Mrs. Buder-Monath was convinced that #MeToo had a significant positive impact on many people, women in particular, after she had talked to them for a reportage, even though she was very skeptical in the beginning.

[...] in the case of #MeToo it really did achieve something very positive I believe, because now people actually openly talk about this actual taboo topic that is sexual harassment. As a woman, I believe, you do not have to hide anymore when you say
‘I have also experienced this as a problem in my career,’ or, ‘in my life I have experienced this as a problem,’ and earlier it tendentially was like this, also in my young professional career, ‘Don’t be like that, you are working at a TV channel and are always busy to make yourself pretty anyway, no wonder that you get hit on, it is no big deal, really.’ […] and yes, I think one has the feeling that the topic now is really anchored in the minds of the people and will not come out of there so fast. (Hilde Buder-Monath)

She also is of the opinion that companies might take the next step in making sure sexual harassment and violence is better addressed and points out that it is especially the management department that also needs to take actions, not only the staff.

First of all, I think, the management will certainly do it in some companies, that they will be aware of that and say “wow, we did not know that, and we actually have to do something about it.” I have to say at ZDF there had happened a lot since then […] here at my working place I have the impression yes, it has thoroughly arrived and it will stay like this, it is established now […] and this being the case yes, that has changed. In other companies it will certainly not come from the management, but there will be staff councils or labor unions or women’s representatives who will say ‘guys, we have missed something here, we really did not notice that well, we have to tackle the issue in another way.’ (Hilde Buder-Monath)

When companies take actions like this, it might be another step forward to solve the issue of sexism in society. However, it is a slow process and the next generations will reveal its success, or its failure. Nevertheless, through #MeToo people once more became aware of the issue, and through such hashtags it is able to stay in the public eye.

6.3. #MeToo in the Issue-Attention Cycle

In the following, I will demonstrate to what extent the five stages of Downs’ (1972) issue-attention model fit to the #MeToo debate with the help of the results of the content analysis and insights of my expert interviews. I will especially draw on the research results by Lörcher and Neverla (2015) as well as Peterson (2009) and Waldherr (2014) to argue for the lifecycle of the hashtag #MeToo and for a suitable updated model

#MeToo in the five stages invented by Downs (1972)

It is hard to argue for the first stage, the Pre-problem Stage, as offline debates about sexism have been around for a long time, but its online presence is rather new. As it was the scandal around the film producer Harvey Weinstein and especially his abuse of actresses which was the reason for the creation of #MeToo and its rise, this can be taken as the problem in the pre-problem stage. Furthermore, even the slogan #MeToo was used before but did just not receive as much attention. So the inappropriate behavior in
the film industry was known by special circles of people as well as #MeToo in connection to sexual harassment.

The second stage, Alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm, occurred after the Weinstein case was revealed and reported about. First, newspapers in Germany as well as in many other countries reported about the Weinstein affair, then an American actress asked many others to share that their own sexual harassment and/or violence stories with the hashtag #MeToo on Twitter. The fact that the film producer abused so many actresses was shocking already, but the hashtag led to an even greater reaction than the traditional media coverage of the scandal could have done. The meaning of the hashtag was to connect and unite other victims of sexual harassment, not only famous people but everyone who had to suffer an encounter with a perpetrator. #MeToo gave many women and men a voice to reveal a still existing misunderstanding and inequality when it comes to how women are treated in the working field as well as in private. It pressured the government, but it pressured companies more to find a way to protect especially female employees from sexual harassment in the working field, a place where male power domination still takes place.

I would argue that #MeToo has also already passed the third stage, Realizing the cost of significant progress, by the majority, those who used the hashtag rather to bring the debate forward than to really engage in it. They have realized that this problem is not something that can and will be solved in a short amount of time. Asking my interviewees about it, all of them told me that people who behave in such a way, who mistreat women to show power structures, will not suddenly change. The next generations will show whether these debates were useful or not and really reveal their potential.

Therefore, to some this debate may seem pointless and they can be placed in the fourth stage, Gradual decline of intense public interest, as they gradually lose interest in it, but people who had already fought against this issue and for equality of men and women will continue to fight, and those I would argue do still post #MeToo on Twitter.
As I learned e.g. from Mrs. Hilde Buder-Monath as well as from Dr. Paula-Irene Villa, there were some actions taken because of the debate. Companies look more after their staff and employees to tackle sexual violence and to be able to say that this does not occur in their rooms anymore. Therefore, the debate might have also already reached the fifth stage, the Post-problem stage. However, after over half a year of media coverage, #MeToo posts still appear. People still use it to make aware of the problem, and as social media monitoring expert Daniel Köthe showed, the posts still appear regularly (see fig. 8). Downs (1972) considers the fourth stage as the decline of public interest and the fifth stage as the end of media attention. At that time, it was traditional analogue media that set the agenda and therefore represented the ‘public’ (McCombs 2002). However, with social media today this shift has changed (Neuman et al. 2014). Grzywinska and Borden (2012, p. 10) found out in their study that social media can also build and set the agenda. Today, there is not only offline media anymore, but social media and traditional media work in correlation (Neuman et al. 2014). Therefore, it is necessary to also take social media into account when looking at an issue-attention cycle. Not only traditional media represent the public, but social media equally. With these opinion-making and opinion-uttering online media platforms today, not only the pace of issue-attention cycles has changed, but the stages might also need readjustment.

Figure 8: Timeline of posts with #MeToo by Germans on Social Media by Daniel Köthe.

Waldherr’s (2012) four interdependent variables that affect public attention are interesting to address here as they are also proof that Downs’ (1972) original issue-attention cycle is not universally valid as differences exist between issues, countries and the kind of media (Lörcher & Neverla 2015, p. 18). The four variables are stakeholders, the constellation of stakeholders, events, and issues (Waldherr 2012). Stakeholders on Twitter are a broad mass of different people. There are online journalists on which I focused on by addressing four German newspapers, but also public persons such as actors and actresses, politicians, lobbyists, companies, and private people. The graph by
Daniel Köthe (see fig. 8) compared to the graph I created (see fig. 1) showed that the attention is kept alive through the whole mass of different conflicting stakeholders on Twitter in general compared to looking at only one kind of stakeholders. To distinguish between events and issues I will also make use of the distinction that Lörcher and Neverla (2015) made in their research about issue-attention: events are “discrete happenings, that are limited by space and time” (Shaw 1977, p. 20, ref. in Lörcher & Neverla 2015, p. 18) whereas issues are broader, and different events can be placed among them. In the case of this thesis, sexism in Germany is the broader issue, and happenings like the Weinstein scandal just recently, or in the case of the hashtag #aufschrei the affair with the politician making an inappropriate comment towards a journalist, are defined as events that remind of the still existing issue.

So where is the hashtag then placed? As Dr. Ronny Patz mentioned, the hashtag serves as a catalyzer, a connector of events and issues. It is an attention-grabber, it is not the hashtag itself that convinces people (Dr. Stefan Münker), but it is the large number of shares, tweets and retweets that can get the ball rolling. The attention level might be significantly lower if there were no hashtags engaged. Therefore, it might be worth to include them in an issue-attention model. Compared to the stylized pattern of an issue-attention cycle (see fig. 9), there are no such obvious changes in the level of attention looking at the findings of what newspapers posted on #MeToo per month. While there are ups and downs noticeable, it is not to such a strong extent than the model suggests.

![Figure 1](image1.png)

**Figure 1**: Stylized pattern of the issue-attention cycle. Adapted from "Die Dynamik der Medienaufmerksamkeit: Ein Simulationsmodell," by A. Waldherr, 2012, Baden-Baden: Nomos. Copyright 2012 by Nomos.

![Figure 9](image2.png)


This becomes even more obvious looking at the graph Daniel Köthe sent me showing the social media behavior of Germans regarding #MeToo (see fig. 8). Compared to the stylized pattern of the issue-attention cycle, it seems that there was no stage of latency or breakthrough when it comes to #MeToo, but it went straight to a boom when tens of
thousands of Germans started to use it. Also different from the stylized pattern is that there is no sharp stage of fatigue, but more ups and downs as events led to fast reactions and remembering of issues in online arenas. Peaks in the graph were events like film festivals as stated by Daniel Köthe in the interview. Lörcher and Neverla (2015, p.25) analyzed event and arena specific dynamics in their research about the issue of climate change online and found out that the attention indeed does not reflect the issue-attention cycle created by Downs (1972), as this was constructed for longer periods of time. The average duration of issue-cycles was studied to be 1 ½ years “with a high variance between issues and a long-term trend of cycles becoming shorter over time” (McCombs and Zhu 1995, ref. in Waldherr 2014, p. 859). This time frame varies greatly when looking at preceding debates about sexism in Germany. #aufschrei was made in Germany in 2013. In that year it also had the strongest news coverage, but it seemed it was then forgotten quite easily until the next event led to a remembering of the hashtag and its meaning.

Therefore, it seems as if the first wave of attention lasted for only about one year. After that newspapers would ask what has changed and what the outcome of such a discussion was (Caspari 2014). However, #aufschrei was mentioned along with other hashtags such as #ausnahmslos, #neinheitnein, and also #MeToo. New events that led to new hashtags caused a remembering of past hashtags and connected them.

Consequently, there might be a decline in the intensity of interest in some issues, like Downs (1972) describes in his cycle, but (1) it does not necessarily affect the whole public, and (2) it does not necessarily reach Downs’ (1972) fifth stage, the post-problem stage, which states that public media attention reaches an end since the hashtag #MeToo and the issue of sexual harassment live on through social media, which is part of public media nowadays. There are modified versions of the issue-attention cycle, e.g. by Karen Peterson (2009, p. 11) who changed the model so that it fits to the limited media access and knowledge by the public on international terrorism (see fig. 10). She argues that due to the lack of knowledge about this delicate topic the public is not able to complete stage three, Realization of the Costs, but that any events within this issue will take the

public to stage two, *Alarmed Discovery and Euphoric Enthusiasm*, again (Peterson 2009, p. 11). This explanation does not fit to the issue of sexism in Germany as there is not much information the government can hide regarding this topic. Especially women have, unfortunately, experienced it often so that the third stage can be completed, as history has also shown the decline in intensity of interest in that topic. However, hashtag activism can lead to a stagnancy, and some stages might have to be renamed to live up to that, or due to the fast pace of the spread of news in social media, some stages might be reached simultaneously. What makes sense is to include the variable ‘Key Event’ which Peterson (2009) added. With this modification, it becomes clearer that issue-attention comes in waves rather than a cycle, as new emerging events can lead to an increase in attention again.

Including hashtags in an issue-attention model, it makes sense to also not speak of a cycle which Lörcher and Neverla (2015) suggest, but rather of dynamics. As hashtags easily connect events with issues, attention can rise quickly again after it had already dropped. Apart from that, it is difficult to speak of an end of public attention when people on social media might still use the hashtag or recirculate earlier posts through retweeting and sharing on Twitter. With the earlier identified notion that issue-attention comes as waves and hashtags as a connector of issues and events which re-rise attention, a model that lives up to the current #MeToo debate could look like as follows (see fig. 11):

*Figure 11: Modified issue-attention model suitable to social media.*
The model is similar to the stylized pattern of the issue-attention model (see fig. 9), but there is no sharp curve indicating fatigue and therefore the end of media attention. Inspired by the graph of social media attention sent to me by Daniel Köthe (see fig. 8) and the modified issue-attention cycle by Peterson (2009) (see fig. 10), this graph shows the dynamics of attention online connected to hashtags that lead to quick rises of interest again due to new events. The post-problem stage is rather a stagnation of attention than the end. The stages can repeat, and it is difficult to predict when there is a complete end of media attention, e.g. when looking at aufschrei that was remembered through #MeToo. Again, regarding the fact that social media is part of public media nowadays, together with traditional media, interest groups will still post about these issues after traditional media stopped, and therefore media interest does not completely end.

Moreover, I found the descriptions ‘pre-problem stage’ and ‘post-problem stage’ to be somewhat misleading. An issue that passed the post-problem stage will never be allotted pre-problem status again. As this becomes more precise when looking at Downs’ (1972) definitions of each stage, I wanted to at least add some information so that it becomes clearer (see fig. 11).

After an issue reaches the last stage by Downs (1972) which indicates that some actions are taken, and the main interest is fading, it will come back to the stage in which mainly interest groups care for a steady level of interest. From then on, new events can reignite the issue again (Peterson 2009).

7. Discussion

7.1. Summary

The research questions for this thesis were to find out what the attention dynamics of #MeToo on Twitter were and what this says about the relationship between mainstream media and hashtag activism in Germany, and in turn what the media coverage of #MeToo then tells us about “issue-attention cycle“ theory and on the other hand, how the theory can help us understand #MeToo. The findings of the content analysis have shown that there has been many ups and downs in the lifecycle of the hashtag so far. Analyzing Twitter posts of the four representative newspapers Zeit Online, BILD, SZ, and WELT revealed that media attention was strongest in October 2017, when #MeToo started, and in January 2018 (see fig. 1-3). Especially Zeit Online and SZ had a strong interest in the hashtag and used it quite frequently (see fig. 2). Reason for that might be Zeit Online’s younger audience that can identify more with the topic than readers of BILD or WELT. As SZ is regarded as independent and opinion-forming, it seemed to be important for them to also inform its audience frequently about new developments and events emerging through #MeToo. Events that led to the rise of attention were the controversial criticism on the debate by 100 French women, among them actress Catherine Deneuve, as well as the sexual harassment scandal around the German film
producer Dieter Wedel. Looking at theories of news values and selection, especially the updated criteria by O’Neill and Harcup (2009, p. 168), it becomes clear why these events were so broadly covered as they address more than one of their criteria: the events are about celebrities, they address the entertainment sector, the case of Wedel and also the comments by the French women came as a surprise, they are relevant to #MeToo, and they were rather bad news. #MeToo connected events and happenings like these with the overall issue of sexual violence and harassment in Germany. The fact that the newspapers I chose to look at still occasionally post under the hashtag, as well as the fact that the number of posts on social media is still quite steady which the analysis sent to me by social media monitoring expert Daniel Kôthe proved (see fig. 8), demonstrates that the interest in such hashtag activism in Germany is present and strong.

It also proved, however, that people on social media are still interested when traditional media already decreased its news coverage on the topic. That is where Downs’ (1972) issue-attention theory needs to be revised. Employing his five stages on #MeToo proved that media attention does not necessarily come to an end when hashtags are involved.

As the journalistic behavior plays an important role in the creation of news waves (Waldherr 2014) since it is often journalists who frame issues in a certain way (Scheufele & Tewksbury 2006, p. 11), hashtag campaigns such as #MeToo are able to prolong media attention spans by connecting events with the issue and hence bringing the attention back to it. If compared to previous hashtag campaigns such as #aufschrei which was made in Germany (see fig. 4 and 5), the analysis showed that hashtags coming from very important persons, such as Hollywood actresses, have much more influence even though they address the very same topic. Apart from that, this new flare-up of the debate about sexism in Germany led to some changes as I learned from my interview participants: Especially companies want to take a closer and stricter look at such incidents now and in future.

Placing the hashtag campaign #MeToo on Twitter in an issue-attention model demonstrated that it is necessary to add ‘new events’ and the hashtag as a connector of events and issues to make the model live up to current media structures including social media. Furthermore, it is more reasonable to illustrate attention dynamics in form of waves rather than a cycle (see fig. 11), as it is difficult to argue for a complete stop of media attention, which Downs (1972) does in his fifth stage, which would be necessary to reach the pre-problem stage. When it comes to the question who sets the agenda (McCombs 2002) and therefore is responsible for what topics will be covered, it is not only analogue media such as newspapers today anymore, but social media likewise. As to that, the formulation ‘pre-problem’ and ‘post-problem’ stage is imprecise, as it is not possible to reach that status again. I would rather suggest using information describing the stages, like Downs (1972) did in the others. With this new model, it is possible to show the dynamics of attention in social media with the use of hashtags and it therefore leads to a better understanding and rethinking of current media structures, notably why certain issues come and go in the mass media coverage nowadays.
7.2. Contextualization of Findings in General Research Field

The issue-attention cycle was researched and considered by many scholars before. However, most of the studies focus on traditional media. It has only been over the past few years that researchers focus more on the internet and social media which are an important source for news nowadays. Together with traditional media, online and offline, they represent the public and set the agenda.

With my approach to create an issue-attention model suitable for social media and hashtags as a connector of events and issues, I would like to build on contemporary research on issue-attention, such as the simulation of news waves by Waldherr (2014), the study on agenda setting by Grzywinska and Borden (2012), and the dynamics of issue-attention in online communication by Lörcher and Neverla (2015). With social media as a fairly new medium, the issue-attention dynamics have changed, and more research is needed to better understand them. With my contribution to this field which is part of the greater field of media and communications, I am going one step further towards a better understanding of how issue-attention dynamics on social media, specifically on Twitter, work and can be demonstrated. This helps to understand the impact of social media when it comes to agenda setting and how this challenges traditional media structures. This is important to society at large which is often influenced by the media to some extent, and powerful hashtags such as #MeToo might be able to challenge societal indifferences and lead to political changes. Especially a problem such as sexism which is deeply rooted in the prevailing societal structures does not change immediately. Such things take time and in order to achieve change in the long run, they need to stay in the public eye. Hashtags contribute to that, and my research about their issue-attention presence makes the progress visible.

7.3. Implementation and Limitations

The study was not difficult to realize as I had easy access to the information I was looking for as well as very cooperative interview participants who were willing to give me some of their time. However, I intended to do a snowball sampling in the beginning which did not work out the way I wanted it to. So instead of relying on my interview participants for more possible interviewees, I searched for them myself. Nevertheless, I was very satisfied with the information outcome I have gained through my interviews.

There are some limitations to this project which need to be considered. First, the amount of data I collected is low compared to projects with financial support that I became aware of through my research. Even though I believe it lives up to the scope of this thesis, it might be necessary to look at more newspapers, and maybe other forms of traditional media and their online appearance to gain more valuable data. In addition to that, it is useful to have more interview participants, as in this case it is not possible to argue that one person can speak for the whole field of study. As the experts I contacted are not the average Twitter users, I might focus on them in a further study to collect
more data of how hashtags are shared and retweeted to stay in the public eye. Another limitation is that #MeToo is not over yet. From this point in time, there may still be events to come that flare up the discussion and lead to a rise in attention. This project focused on the time frame from October 1, 2017 to July 7, 2018, but as the graphic by Daniel Köthe (see fig. 8) showed attention started to rise again after that. I would suggest more longitudinal studies on issue-attention on social media through hashtags, in this case of the hashtag #MeToo, when the attention on #MeToo seems to stagnate. Since sexism as a social and political issue is not easily solved, the next generations will show whether these debates were useful or not and really reveal their potential.

8. Conclusion

To sum up, in order to place the hashtag campaign #MeToo in the issue-attention cycle by Downs (1972), it is necessary to include some more stages, as well as eventually rename both the first and fifth stage to make it more precise. My additions to the existing model would be ‘new events that reignite the debate’, as suggested by Peterson (2009), as well as hashtags as a connector of events and issues. Furthermore, demonstrating the attention dynamics as waves seems more reasonable, as it is difficult to prospect a final and complete end of media attention, when there will always be interest groups who keep it alive on social media. The data I collected, as well as the interview information I gained showed that there is a strong interest in hashtag activism by Germans, although the interest is higher when it is ‘Hollywood-made’ rather than ‘home-made’. The strong focus on the topic through the hashtag led to some changes such as more awareness of the issue in companies as well as a rethinking of existing societal structures. The attention of the debate in Germany was at a peak when the debate started – it went straight to a boom – and in January, when a similar case of the Weinstein scandal only with a German film producer came to light, as well as the controversial comment by the French actress Catherine Deneuve and 100 other prominent women. Journalistic behavior influences news waves, and hashtags are a means of prolonging media attention spans by connecting new events with issues and therefore bringing the attention back to it. My updated model of the issue-attention cycle lives up to current media structures and can make attention dynamics of social movements on Twitter visible. It is thus an important contribution to contemporary issue-attention studies in media and communications.

Further research is necessary to gain more knowledge about attention dynamics in social media. I would be particularly interested in carrying out a simulation which was not possible for this thesis due to my lack of knowledge in this field. However, with my updated version of the issue-attention cycle by Downs (1972), I feel I was still able to make an interesting contribution and was able to solve my research problem.
References


Appendixes

Appendix 1: Collected dates of posts for Content Analysis

1) Dates with post on #MeToo by German newspapers:


2) Dates with post on #aufschrei by German newspapers:


BILD #aufschrei: 25.01.2013, 25.01.2013, 25.01.2013, 24.01.2013

WELT #aufschrei: 11.01.2016, 05.01.2016, 12.03.2015, 19.02.2015, 19.02.2015, 19.08.2014, 26.05.2014, 27.05.2013, 28.01.2013, 27.01.2013, 26.01.2013

3) Dates with posts on #ausnahmslos by German newspapers:

Zeit Online #ausnahmslos: 11.01.2016
BILD #ausnahmslos: ---
SZ #ausnahmslos: 11.01.2016
WELT #ausnahmslos: 11.01.2016

4) Dates with posts on #neinheißtnein by German newspapers:

Zeit Online #neinheißtnein: 23.08.2016, 07.07.2016, 14.06.2016, 08.03.2016
BILD #neinheißtnein: ---
SZ #neinheißtnein: 13.01.2017, 07.06.2016, 15.05.2016
WELT #neinheißtnein: ---
Appendix 2: Interview Questions (Translated from German):

1. Please introduce yourself briefly (name, age, profession etc.)
2. Which social media do you use?
3. Do you use hashtags?
4. How would you define hashtag activism?
5. What do you find are advantages and disadvantages of hashtag activism?
6. What do you think of the #MeToo movement/debate? What importance do you give to it?
7. When was the last time you heard of #MeToo and where (Television, radio, newspaper, social media, internet)?
8. Would you say that sexual violence is mainly a female problem?
9. Do you think that the #MeToo debate will lead to more attention of the topic of sexual violence in the long run also?
10. Regarding sexual violence, what has change in Germany so far after the topic received such a great media coverage through #MeToo? Are there political changes?
11. What do you think needs to change in politics and society to better fight sexual violence in future?
12. How long, do you think, will the hashtag receive such a great media attention?
13. Is the media attention already receding?
14. Do you think that hashtags are a good way to tackle topics like sexual violence? Why?