



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Breaking the Silence: How Digital Activism Shapes Undergraduate Women's Emotions and Actions towards Social Issues, with reference to #MeToo

Rosie Husson

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Supervisor: Professor Julie Firmstone

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the impact of digital activism (DA), particularly the #MeToo movement, on undergraduate women's emotional responses and subsequent actions related to sexual harassment. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates a quantitative survey with 62 respondents and a qualitative focus group, aiming to understand how engagement with DA on social media shapes emotional investment and behaviours. The survey findings reveal that 85% of participants have engaged with DA, with Instagram and TikTok being the most used platforms. The results show that the #MeToo movement has increased awareness of sexual harassment (65%) and empowered women to speak out (74%), although respondents remain sceptical about its real-world societal impact (60%). The thematic analysis of qualitative responses from open-ended survey questions highlights three key themes: enhances awareness of sexual harassment, empathy and emotional connection through personal testimonies, and increased visibility of the issue in mainstream media. Focus group discussions further uncover the emotional complexity of DA, such as emotional fatigue and activism burnout, as well as the tension between authenticity and performativity in online spaces. Participants also reported some offline behavioural changes, such as altered speech and increased self-awareness. Overall, this dissertation illustrates how DA, while fostering emotional engagement and raising awareness, often struggles to translate into significant offline actions. These findings contribute to the ongoing discourse of the effectiveness of DA in fostering lasting societal change, particularly in relation to sexual harassment.

Key words: Digital Activism, #MeToo, Performative Activism, Emotions, Social Media

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2 Introduction

In 2017, the #MeToo movement erupted across social media platforms, igniting a global conversation on sexual harassment, which has long been hidden amongst the shadows. What started as a hashtag soon evolved into a powerful tool for social change, inspiring millions of women to share their stories of victimisation. The movement gathered extensive media attention and online engagement, as demonstrated by the hashtag being used over 12 million times within the first 24 hours (CBS, 2017). Sparked, amplified, and sustained through the power of DA, the movement quickly evolved into a global social force. By leveraging social media platforms, individuals could share personal stories of sexual harassment, thereby extending the movement's reach far beyond traditional activism (Mendes et al., 2018). The digital landscape provided an accessible space for survivors to collectively speak out, transforming a personal experience into a collective social statement.

Building on the growing influence of DA, this dissertation investigates the impact of online platform engagement on undergraduate women's emotions and actions in response to sexual harassment. By examining the intersection of digital activism and emotional labour, this study seeks to understand how digital platforms not only facilitate the spread of activist messages but also shape individuals' actions and emotional processing of such issues. To guide this exploration, this research is driven by the following questions:

- 1) *How does engagement with digital activism on social media shape undergraduate women's emotions and their subsequent actions related to social issues, with specific reference to #MeToo? (Primary RQ/RQ1)*
- 2) *How do undergraduate women interact with digital campaigns, such as #MeToo and what forms of participation do they engage in? (RQ2)*

- 3) *To what extent does engagement with DA translate into tangible offline actions, such as reporting incidents of harassment or altering personal behaviour in response?*

(RQ3)

- 4) *Do differing social media backgrounds affect the way in which people interact with digital activism? (RQ4)*

These questions are designed to delve into the nuances of how digital activism shapes both emotional engagement and subsequent behaviours in response to social issues like sexual harassment.

This research is driven by the need to better understand how DA shapes the emotional and behavioural responses of undergraduate women in an increasingly digital society. While the rise of social media has enabled widespread visibility for activist causes (boyd, 2010), it has also transformed how individuals engage with these movements, often blurring the boundaries between awareness, action, and performance. Despite the prominence of #MeToo in digital spaces, there is limited research exploring how undergraduate women, a demographic that is both digitally native and socially conscious (Loader et al., 2014; Banet-Weiser, 2018), emotionally respond to and interact with such campaigns. By focusing on their experiences, this study aims to fill a gap in the literature and offer insight into the lived realities of those navigating activism online - providing a timely and relevant contribution to conversations around gender, media, and digital culture. Other research based on DA provides insights into a broader demographic, and does not focus on a specific group, such as undergraduate women in the UK. This group occupies a unique intersection of age, and digital fluency, making their experiences particularly important for understanding the affective dimensions of DA. By examining emotional responses alongside engagement

patterns, this study moves beyond metrics of visibility or participation to explore how activism is personally processed and embodied in everyday life.

This dissertation will use a mixed-methods approach to research, meaning a study that “employs both quantitative and qualitative methods as part of a single research strategy” (Clark et al., 2021, p. 556). Specifically, the research utilises an online self-completion survey alongside a focus group of six participants, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of both statistical patterns and in-depth personal experiences. These methods offer valuable insight into the research aims and predicted findings, and, by using both methods, this research aims to uncover not only statistical trends but also the rich, subjective experiences of participants.

Based on the existing literature and the research aims, it is anticipated that the findings will reveal significant patterns in how undergraduate women emotionally engage with and respond to digital activism, particularly the #MeToo movement. It is expected that the survey will highlight diverse levels of awareness and participation in DA, and the focus group will reveal deeper emotional and personal experiences with digital campaigns. The combination of these methods will allow for a more nuanced exploration of how digital activism shapes women’s emotional responses and actions related to social issues.

This study aims to offer meaningful insight into how digital activism is emotionally experienced and enacted by undergraduate women, contributing to ongoing conversation about gender, media, and social change in digital spaces. In doing so, the research addresses a critical gap in the literature by centring the voices of undergraduate women and their emotional engagement with digital activism.

3 Literature Review

Sexual harassment remains a pervasive issue globally, deeply rooted in systemic gender inequalities. In recent years, digital platforms have emerged as powerful tools for advocacy, enabling individuals to share their experiences and mobilise for social change. This shift underscores the transformative potential of DA in addressing sensitive and historically silenced topics. DA allows individuals, media, and activist organisations to cooperate to create meanings of issues (Botan and Taylor, 2004), contributing to social movements and changes by spreading information across the internet to distinct groups of individuals.

The #MeToo campaign, initiated in 2006 by activist Tarana Burke and globally popularised in 2017, stands as a landmark DA movement (Sini, 2017). It has empowered millions of women to share their experiences, fostering collective action and reshaping societal conversations around sexual misconduct.

This literature review examines the ways in which DA has risen to popularity amongst activists across the world, and the way in which different demographics react to it. It explores key themes such as the rise of DA, the campaign's role in shaping public discourse and its impact on specific demographics. By synthesising existing research, this review seeks to contextualise the influence of digital platforms in addressing sexual harassment and promoting social change, helping to identify gaps in the existing research that warrant further investigation.

While numerous studies have highlighted the global impact of #MeToo, there is limited exploration of how DA has impacted society, and how individuals' engagement with, and responses to activism, manifest across digital platforms and online networks. The long-term implications of the movement remain under-researched, and thus it is important to investigate how individual behaviour has changed alongside the movements. For example, the #MeToo movement catalysed a significant increase in the number of women publicly sharing their

experiences of sexual violence (Cummings, 2020). Each shared experience often encourages others to come forward, creating a ripple effect.

3.1 The Rise of Digital Activism

Activism is frequently conceptualised through the lens of traditional protest tactics, with our minds envisioning images of protests and marches, symbolising collective efforts in physical spaces aimed at driving social or political change. Within this dissertation, DA is defined as the utilisation of online platforms, particularly social media, to disseminate information, generate discourse, and raise awareness about societal issues with the aim of driving change. In our technologically advancing society, it is indubitable that DA has risen to superiority when encouraging change. DA is unique compared to the prior forms of social movement and change; it strives to open new avenues for innovative action within social media organisations (George & Leidner, 2019). Online activism is more efficient than typical activism, such as demonstrations and boycotts, since participants can establish an online movement from the comfort of their own homes, through a digital device or platform. DA expands the reach and accessibility of social movements by enabling the rapid spread of awareness on large social platforms. This allows engagement with individuals who may not typically participate in activism, whilst also increasing pressure on governments and institutions to take action. Herawati et al (2023) argued that the pace of social change has intensified and accelerated within the twenty-first century, due to the digitalisation of social movements. This shows there to be advantages of using DA, beginning with the speed and accessibility in conducting a social movement.

However, there are issues regarding DA. Within literature surrounding DA, there is a popular term used to describe a disconnection between action and awareness, “slacktivism” (Glenn, 2015, p. 81). This term is a combination of ‘slacker’ and ‘activism’ and highlights a departure from traditional activism utilising tangible resources, and the rise of lazy activism we tend to

use nowadays (p. 82). Knibbs (2013) describes slacktivism as “feel good back patting” (no pagination), as individuals tend to watch and have superficial interactions, such as liking a post, instead of actively responding and reinforcing the social movement. This highlights both the advantages and limitations of DA, and this research project will explore the broader implications associated with it. Bleh et al., (2024) argued that activism “rests on the perception of efficacy, especially *collective efficacy*” which refers to the belief that the activist group can affect its relevant environment (p. 3). This concept is crucial when considering how individuals emotionally and behaviourally respond to DA. When individuals believe their actions online contribute to real change, they may feel empowered and more likely to engage further – but when that belief fades, it can lead to frustration, disengagement, or emotional fatigue, especially in movements like #MeToo.

While George and Leidner (2019) highlight digital activism as empowering, Karatzogianni (2015) complicates this view by addressing the power struggles and surveillance that also define online resistance. Karatzogianni (2015) investigated DA and discovered four different waves worthy of notation. These waves describe how DA has become mainstream on a global level. The first wave began with the Zapista movement in 1994 with alternative media such as Indymedia, which aided an anti-globalisation movement (p. 5). The second (p. 15) and third wave (p. 25) from 2001 to 2010 is constituted by the global spread of DA beyond the countries it initially originated from (the UK and USA). Finally, the fourth wave indicates the mainstreaming of DA between 2010-2014 (p. 66). As evidential, DA has long been a part of social movements; however, it only gained widespread recognition as an effective tool for driving change after its presence was highlighted in mainstream media. An example of this is the BBC’s coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement; the BBC acknowledged that “Black Lives Matter has sparked a hashtag, a network of grass-roots organisations, and a moral collective of activists” (Maqbool, 2020). The recognition of DA by a reputable news

outlet, like the BBC, reinforces its credibility and demonstrates its impact, helping to establish a compelling reputation for this form of social movement.

As a subject, DA has emerged as a “hot topic” (Kaun & Uldam, 2018), specifically within academia. Owing to the contemporary nature of the topic, George and Leidner (2019) conducted a theoretical literature review with an aim to unpack the multifaceted nature of DA. Many definitions of DA circulate the internet, however, the researchers defined it as “social activism mediated through information and communication technologies” (p. 2), linking this approach to the original strategy of creating societal change, social movements. Within their study, George and Leidner (2019) compare and contrast the notions of social movements and DA, particularly in line with a framework introduced by Tilly (2006 as cited by George and Leidner 2019). Tilly (2004, p. 3) defined social movements as:

A sustained campaign of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, based on organisations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities.

Before the proliferation of DA, social movements achieved their initial aims by developing through two sets of four stages, proposed by Christiansen (2009), and Tilly (2006).

Christianson (2009) presented the notion that social movements evolve and grow through four stages; ‘emergence, coalescence, bureaucratization, and decline’ (pp. 15-16). Initially, dissatisfaction with social conditions is unorganised between individuals (p.16), but as grievances become clearer, leadership and collective action begin to emerge (p. 17).

Movements then adopt structured strategies, gaining political influence (p. 18), before eventually declining through regression, co-optation, success, or failure (Miller, 1999, p.19 cited by Christianson, 2009).

Following on from this, Tilly (2006) created guidelines for a successful social movement with the acronym of WUNC (worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment). George and Leidner (2019) propose that the WUNC theory has lost its efficacy for DA success. When social movements were the dominant model for societal progress, they would achieve their aims of social change through mass protests, strikes, and boycotts, and in extreme cases, civil disobedience. Through disrupting the norms of everyday life, the social movement organisations drew attention to themselves, in the hopes of gaining more followers for the movement. By way of example, Tilly (2006) considered commitment to be a key principle within a social movement. It could be argued that showing commitment, in these circumstances, “denotes the level of effort and resources that members are willing to sacrifice for the social movement” (Tilly, 2006 cited by George and Leidner, 2019, p 3). However, this could now be deemed as unnecessary as low-level commitment activities, such as creating and building a hashtag on social media, can have a noteworthy influence with minimal dedication (p. 4). This demonstrates how the gradual use of DA creates an easier approach to activism, hence why it is increasingly becoming a common point of study for scholars. It is important to highlight the topics within DA that attract academics, such as success of DA, and the notion that DA is a more accessible way of creating social change.

As mentioned, there are many definitions portraying DA and scholars find it complex to agree on one significant conclusion for DA. This dissertation illustrates that it is the utilisation of online platforms to spread information regarding a social issue, amongst other things. This situation fosters ongoing debates within the academic community, as the absence of a universally accepted definition hinders the establishment of a fundamental framework for scholars to build upon. These circumstances could be caused by the modernity of the theory, but this can be contradicted by Kaun & Uldam (2018). They conclude that there is an overemphasis on the growing theory and how ‘new’ it appears to be. It can be claimed that

DA predates the emergence of social media in the 2010s, with its origins traceable to earlier forms of online advocacy and engagement. Mobile phones, handheld camcorders, and personalised computers changed the way social movements were organised and documented (Askanius, 2012 as cited by George & Leidner, 2019). This highlights the evolving nature of DA, suggesting that its significance lies not in its novelty, but its adaptability and enduring impact on social movements over time.

It is argued that there is a connection between online and offline activism, and it has been “hypothesized that the Internet has a great role in mobilizing people in protests” (Dumitrascu, 2020, p. 72). Online and offline activism tend to operate in tandem, for example, information for a face-to-face protest could be distributed through an online platform, such as social media. Moreover, online activism can sustain momentum beyond in-person demonstrations by keeping conversations active, sharing real-time updates, and reaching a broader audience. This digital engagement allows activists to coordinate efforts more efficiently, amplify marginalised voices, and apply continuous pressure on policymakers. Additionally, research suggests that individuals who engage in DA are more likely to participate in offline political actions, such as attending protests or signing petitions (Boulianne, 2020). This reinforces the point made by Bleh et al. (2024), as it suggests that a strong sense of collective efficacy fostered through digital platforms can translate into tangible offline action and sustained civic engagement.

3.2 The Role of the #MeToo Campaign in Digital Activism

On October 24th, 2017, the #MeToo campaign began trending on Twitter (now known as X) due to famous actress, Alyssa Milano, engaging with the hashtag in line with allegations held against Harvey Weinstein. Within twenty-four hours of Milano’s tweet, the hashtag had been used twelve million times across the internet (CBS, 2017). The hashtag follows a growing trend that shows how the public are willing to engage with resistance and challenges to

sexism and other forms of oppression using feminist digital communication, which is known as ‘networked feminism’ (Vachhani, 2023, no pagination). The #MeToo brings women alike together to share their personal stories, and to help one another through their struggles relating to the campaign. The campaign not only amplifies individual voices but also exemplifies the potential of DA to enhance marginalised voices, foster collective empowerment, and challenge systematic oppression.

Hashtag feminism is a strand of DA and is the most popular amongst the feminist community as it produces communities of conversation among internet users (Mendes et al., 2018).

Dobrin (2020) has delved into ‘hashtag activism’ and concluded that the hashtag has “surpassed its initial role of labelling online content and had become evocative of a collective narrative” (p. 1), contributing to the creation of important conversations, in this case topics such as sexual violence or harassment. The Arab Spring in 2011 and the rise of the internet and social media, created an online platform for both protestors and supporters to voice their opinions and organise their social movements (Meral and Meral, 2017).

Dobrin (2020) noticed a specific gap within research surrounding the #MeToo movement, regarding the cultural importance of the movement. Dobrin (2020) conducted a discourse analysis of the conversations surrounding the hashtag, upon media articles over the first six months of the #MeToo movement and hashtags popularity. A *Google Trends* analysis over the period of the campaign, reveals a spike in search activity for the hashtag (Google, 2018 as cited by Dobrin, 2020), which matches the change in media discourse, “leading to three stages throughout the movement: confession, recognition and backlash” (Dobrin, 2020, p. 3). These stages were established by individuals sharing their personal stories, much like using the hashtag as a confessional for their experiences; then to applaud women for their bravery, ‘The Silence Breakers’ (a group of women who spoke out about sexual violence in line with the #MeToo campaign), were awarded the TIME’s Person of the Year Award in 2017

(Zacharek, 2017). However, as the movement and hashtag gained popularity, backlash was received which shifted the focus of discourse to focus on the failures of the movement (Dobrin, 2020).

Dobrin's (2020) research consisted of fifty-eight articles published between October 2017 and March 2018. The qualitative assessment used a semiotic lens to analyse and focus on the mentions in articles of the hashtag, and of the narrative surrounding the hashtag, such as the two sides of the story (abuser and accuser). For the narrative of the articles, descriptors were used to refer to the women and men involved, and the action language used to surround them. The words were analysed on a spectrum from utopic to neutral to dystopic connotations, in line with the key stages mentioned earlier (Dobrin, 2020). The contrast between these connotations was reflective of the supportive or antagonistic perspectives throughout the movement, which led to the conclusion of the research being a 'cultural awakening' (p. 12). The movement can be seen as a form of a 'cultural object' (p. 12) to be desired and consumed by everyone. The hashtag and DA within this cultural ideal capture's public attention, establishing the movement at the forefront of people's minds and maintains the relevancy. Thus, DA has become a valuable tool for establishing and maintaining a social movement, especially with a hashtag, as the information is always readily available, and updated.

3.3 Digital Activism and its Role across Different Demographics

It is suggested that the way in which DA is up taken by society differs within changing demographics. It is important to note that DA allowed for more diverse participation, given its accessibility to all internet users. Consequently, the broader representation of participants enables the research of how different groups react and interact with DA.

Gallego (2007) proposed that participation in protest activities (whether social or political), were biased by age, gender, and education. To research this method, Gallego (2007) used the

European Social Survey to analyse equal participation within Europe, as it assures high quality data, and comparability. When researching protest activity, it was notable that young people had higher participation within this category, as well as people with a higher level of education. However, gender remained indifferent, as “the gaps are very small after controlling for other variables” and “women consume politically as often as men do” (p. 21). It could be assumed, following from this data, individuals of any gender that are perhaps younger in age, and have a high educational status would be amenable to DA, and more likely to partake in a movement.

Given that DA primarily occurs on social media, it is importantly to examine how individuals’ social media backgrounds influence the roles they adopt within movements such as #MeToo. Ma and Zhang (2022) employed social network and content analyses to categorise ‘publics’ based on their information-sharing behaviours during the 2018 Chinese #MeToo movement on Sina Weibo, a microblogging platform akin to X or Instagram (China Gravy, 2025, no pagination). They identified three distinct publics: *the provoking public* (media and internet celebrities) who initiate discussion and have broad interests and large followings; *the bridging public* (grassroots individuals) with smaller audiences and a focused interest in specific issues; and the *powerful public*, a hybrid of the two, combining broad reach with focused activism (p. 1). Ma and Zhang (2022) concluded that the bridging public, through their dissemination of niche and specialised content, played a significant role in shaping and advancing the movement – highlighting the considerable power of grassroots sharing on social media.

This study was instrumental in deepening my understanding of how social media facilitates the spread and amplification of information within DA. By highlighting the varying roles users play based on their social media presence and behaviour, it informed the development

of RQ4. Specifically, it led to the consideration whether different social media backgrounds influence levels of engagement with DA.

To deepen my engagement with scholarly research, I examined the work of Williamson et al. (2020), who conducted a study on Canadian university students. This academic work sought to explore undergraduate students' perceptions on DA and social movements, and how important they believe them to be within society, and what roles they play. They offered Canadian students the opportunity to discuss their views within focus groups, using open-ended questions about their thoughts and experiences in relation to the #MeToo campaign. This allowed in depth conversations between the researchers and participants, which concluded with the students classifying the #MeToo movement as a crucial campaign for bringing attention to prominent issues surrounding sexual violence. However, the group of undergraduates identified unaddressed issues and lack of support on their individual university campuses, highlighting a desire for more resources on the topic. The findings of this research suggests that the #MeToo movement is globally seen as an important, positive step towards safety from sexual violence, with some potential areas for improvement.

3.4 Identified Gaps and Research Focus

Through a critical review of existing literature, several gaps in the current understanding of DA became evident, which informed the development and refinement of my research questions. One notable gap concerns the extent to which DA translates into real-world impact. Specifically, there is limited empirical evidence addressing whether movements such as #MeToo results in tangible behavioural changes among women. This gap highlights the need for further investigation into how online engagement with DA may influence offline actions, attitudes, and social behaviours.

4 Methodology

4.1 Methodological Approach

This study aims to examine participants' reactions to and engagement with hashtag activism, with a particular focus on the #MeToo movement. A mixed methods approach has been adopted to explore these interactions in depth. To achieve this, a quantitative design was implemented through a structured online self-completion survey, followed by two qualitative focus groups to facilitate further discussion and gain deeper insights into participants' perspectives. Through conducting this research, I aimed to capture how engagement with DA on social media (Instagram/TikTok) shapes women's emotional responses and gauge their subsequent actions related to social issues. Following this, I endeavoured to find out the ways in which women interact with activism, and how they do this.

As addressed by Clark et al (2021), a self-completion questionnaire “involves respondents answering questions by completing a questionnaire themselves” (p. 211). As mentioned, I chose to conduct my surveys online, due to the convenience of the research method; they are cheap to conduct and can be efficiently completed within a short time frame (pp. 212-213).

As a university student, it is crucial that the research designs I use are inexpensive and suitable to be administered by an individual yet produce a rigorous set of data.

I conducted a pilot survey among several of my peers to assess the clarity and accessibility of my survey. A pilot study consists of a small sample completing the survey before it is officially distributed to the participants so that researchers can ensure that their “questions can be readily applied without misinterpretation” (Hansen & Machin, 2019). Their feedback indicated that certain questions lacked detail and specificity in the answer choices.

Additionally, they suggested that, in some cases, an additional question was necessary to ensure coherence with the section. With this advice, I adapted my survey and presented it

again to my peers. They described the survey as more efficiently structured, and then I distributed the essay to gain responses.

For my qualitative research, I decided to conduct a focus group to explore information gathered in the surveys. A focus group is described as a ‘hybrid’ of a group interview and a group discussion, that “relies on generating or analysing interaction between participants, rather than asking the same question... to each participant in turn” (Frey and Fontana, 1993, as cited by Barbour, 2007, p. 2). I concluded to hold a focus group, with the participants showing different levels of interest in DA. In doing so, this allows me to explore the relationship between varying degrees of engagement with DA and perceptions of hashtag activism.

4.2 Rationale

Research shows that women are significantly more likely than men to use social networking sites, with nine surveys by Pew Research (Duggan, 2013) and a study by Dixon (2024) reporting that 51% of social media users are women. Additionally, women are more vulnerable to sexual harassment, with one in three experiencing physical or sexual violence globally (UN Women, 2019). Given these factors, I chose to focus on women, particularly as an undergraduate myself, for convenience and relevance to the topic.

4.3 Sampling technique

This study focuses on female undergraduate students in the UK, as they represent a key demographic for examining engagement with DA, particularly movements such as #MeToo. To recruit participants for this survey, a non-probability sampling method was employed, specifically snowball sampling. As an undergraduate student, it was a necessity to adopt a sampling method that was practical, accessible, and cheap to arrange (Clark et al, 2021, p. 177). Although snowball sampling generally lacks generalisability, it provides an insight into

the findings of a particular group that is being studied, which is valuable for my research. Additionally, at the end of the survey, I invited candidates to indicate whether they would be comfortable being contacted for potential participation in follow-up focus groups. This is an example of voluntary sampling, which is defined as a non-probability design where the sample is selected from ‘potential respondents who are willing to participate in further research’ (Murairwa, 2025, p. 186).

As a UK-based researcher, I chose to study UK undergraduates for practicality, ensuring participants would be able to attend my focus groups. I intended on a sample size of sixty participants to ensure a diverse range of responses, with the expectation that this would result in at least fifteen individuals agreeing to participate in the focus groups.

To gain a representative sample within my research, a sample needs to be calculated that “accurately reflects the population” being studied (Clark et al., 2021). For the sample of UK female undergraduates, the representative sample would be 385 participants. As this is a university level research project, that sample is unattainable, and so my sample is modest.

4.4 Data analysis methods

This study employed a mixed methods approach to data analysis, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative techniques to ensure a comprehensive understanding of how DA shapes particular emotions and actions, within the population of undergraduate women in the UK. The survey data, consisting of quantitative and qualitative data, has been analysed through descriptive statistical analysis, which are “methods used to describe data and their characteristics”, such as frequency analysis, and measures of central tendency (Clark et al, 2021, pp. 753-754). Complementing the descriptive analysis, a thematic analysis was conducted to explore deeper patterns and insights within the qualitative section of the dataset. Within my thematic analysis, I intended to follow the six-phase process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which includes “Familiarizing yourself with your data; Generating Initial

codes; Searching for Themes, Reviewing themes, Defining and naming themes, and, Producing the report” (pp. 87-93). By following this process, my analysis will be detailed and contain a systematic approach to identifying meaningful patterns within the data, ensuring a rigorous and transparent interpretation of participants’ responses.

Additionally, when analysing the transcripts from my focus groups, I conducted a thematic analysis to systematically examine and review recurring themes within the scripts and answers obtained throughout the focus groups. This method allowed me to capture key patterns in the discussions, providing deeper insights into their perspectives on DA, and its relationship and attitudes on speaking out about sexual violence. By coding and categorising responses, I was able to identify overarching themes, such as barriers to participation, motivations for engagement, and the perceived impact of online movements like #MeToo.

4.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are vital for ensuring this research is conducted responsibly, particularly given its sensitive focus on DA, the #MeToo movement, and sexual harassment. In line with the University of Leeds Research Integrity Statement, this study has upheld the principles of honest, rigour, transparency, communication, and care and respect (University of Leeds, 2025). These principles have guided all stages of the research, including clear communication of methods, rigorous data handling, and the protection of participants’ confidentiality and consent. All participants that took part within the survey and focus group consented for their responses to be analysed within this dissertation project (see Appendix ... and ... for the consent form, and participation information sheet).

During the survey stage, informed consent was a key concern. According to Clark et al. (2021), participants must be fully aware of the study’s purpose and given sufficient information to make an informed choice about participation. In this research, respondents

remained anonymous, encouraging honest responses without fear of judgement. This was communicated clearly at the beginning of the survey (see Appendix...).

In the focus group, ethical sensitivity was equally important due to the potentially distressing topic. As Clark et al. (2021, p. 474) noted, participants may feel discomfort during group discussions, making it essential to ensure the right to withdraw at any point. The University of Leeds Research Ethics Policy (2025, p. 2) supports this, stating that participants must be able to withdraw, “without inducement or adverse consequence.” This assurance was provided at the beginning of the focus group, allowing participants to engage safely and freely.

5 Findings

5.1 Quantitative Survey Findings

The survey aimed to gather 100 responses; however, it received 62 completed submissions, resulting in a response rate of 62%. While the sample size is modest, the data collected provides meaningful insight into participants' engagement with DA and the #MeToo movement.

All of whom that participated in this study were undergraduate students based in the UK and of these, 97% identified as female as shown in Table 1 below, aligning with the study's focus on women's experiences in relation to DA.

5.1.1 5.1.1. Table 1: Gender of participants

Option	Count	Percentage
Female	60	97%
Male	0	0%
Non Binary	1	1.5%
Prefer not to say	1	1.5%
Other	0	0%

Source: Author's own work (2025)

The majority of participants (82%) were aged between 18 and 21, reflecting a typical undergraduate demographic (HESA, 2023), as shown in Table 2.

5.1.2 Table 2: Age of Participants

Option	Count	Percentage
18 - 21	51	82%
22 - 25	3	5%
26 and over	8	13%

Source: Author's own work (2025)

Social media emerged as a highly relevant aspect of this study, with 98% of respondents reporting active use of social media platforms, highlighting its central role as a medium for DA. Among these respondents, as shown below in Table 3, they indicated that the most common duration of daily social media use was '1-3 hours'. This was closely followed by '4-7 hours per day', reflecting high levels of engagement with social media platforms across the sample.

5.1.3 Table 3: Hours spent on social media per day

Option	Count	Percentage
Less than 1 hour per day	3	5%
1 - 3 hours per day	29	47%
4 - 7 hours per day	26	42%
More than 7 hours per day	4	6%

Source: Author's own work (2025)

The most commonly used social media platforms among respondents were Instagram (90%), TikTok (85%), and Snapchat (85%). Notably, TikTok emerged as the most frequently used platform overall, with 50% of participants identifying it as their primary social media platform.

A majority of respondents (69%) reported being somewhat familiar with the term 'digital activism'. Upon being provided with a definition, 85% of participants indicated that they had

engaged in DA, primarily through liking posts related to the movement or sharing posts, shown below in Table 4.

5.1.4 Table 4: Different ways people participate in activism

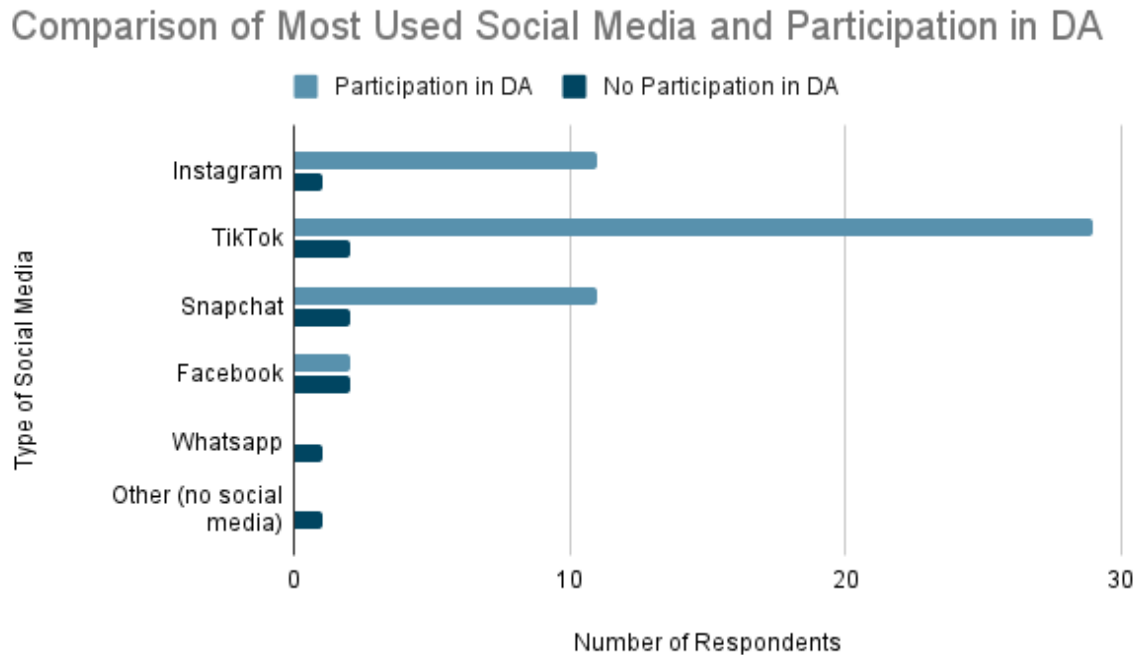
Option	Count	Percentage
Liking posts related to a movement	53	85%
Commenting on posts related to a movement	13	21%
Sharing a post related to a movement	37	60%
Posting your own views on social media via written content	4	6%
Posting your own views on social media via video content	2	3%
Other	5	8%

Source: Author's own work (2025)

65% of respondents reported that their familiarity with, and awareness of, sexual harassment had been enhanced as a result of the #MeToo movement. This suggests that DA, particularly through high-profile campaigns, plays a critical role in raising public consciousness around sensitive social issues.

Below, displays a bar chart (Figure 1) illustrating the relationship between respondents' primary social media platforms and their reported engagement in DA.

5.1.5 Figure 1: Most Used Social Media and Participation in DA



Source: Author's own work (2025)

Interestingly, across all platforms, there was minimal representation of non-participation, with only 5% of respondents indicating that they had not engaged in DA. Lower levels of participation were more commonly associated with platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and among those who reported no social media use. This may be attributed to generational differences and varying levels of openness to engaging with activism in digital spaces.

Additionally, these platforms often lack the visual, algorithm-driven, and interactive features that facilitate the rapid dissemination of activist content, making them less conducive to fostering widespread engagement in online movements (boyd, 2010).

Respondents shared their perspectives on the real-world implications of DA. When asked whether DA empowers individuals to speak out about harassment, 74% of participants indicated that it has somewhat facilitated this, although they acknowledged the ongoing challenges and risks involved in speaking out (see Table 5 below).

5.1.6 Table 5: Effect of DA on disclosure of harassment experiences

Option	Count	Percentage
Yes, social media provides a safe space for survivors	11	18%
Somewhat, but there are still challenges and risks in speaking out	46	74%
No, online platforms are not safe or supportive enough for survivors	3	5%
I am unsure	2	3%

Source: Author's own work (2025)

Similarly, when queried about the potential of DA to drive tangible societal change, the majority (60%) stated that it contributes to raising awareness about issues (see Table 6 below) but does not translate into significant real-world impact.

5.1.7 Table 6: Views on the societal impact of DA

Option	Count	Percentage
Yes, it has a significant impact on policies and social attitudes	21	34%
Somewhat, it raises awareness but has limited real world impact	37	60%
No, online platforms/digital activism does not create meaningful change	2	3%
I am unsure	2	3%

Source: Author's own work (2025)

5.2 Qualitative Survey Findings

Two open-ended survey questions (Q21 and Q23) were included to gather qualitative responses, offering deeper insight into participants' engagement with DA and informing the focus group direction. To analyse these responses, I conducted two thematic analyses, which helped uncover how participants perceived the #MeToo movement, sexual harassment, and the impact of DA on their attitudes and behaviours.

5.3 Enhanced Awareness

Q21 invited participants to describe whether and how, if at all, the #MeToo movement had enhanced their awareness of sexual harassment. While 58% indicated it had, the open-ended responses offered richer insights into how that awareness developed. The responses reflected how the #MeToo movement had a significant impact in normalising public discourse surrounding sexual harassment, educating individuals who did not have a proficient understanding of the issues. Three key themes emerged within the analysis: Awareness of Prevalence and Scale, Personal Connection and Empathy, and Mainstream Media and Public Conversation.

The most prominent theme was the heightened awareness of the prevalence and scale of sexual harassment, especially concerning women's experiences. Of those who responded 'yes', 72% stated the movement increased their understanding of how pervasive the issue is. Comments such as, "*sexual harassment does not discriminate*" and "*it made me realise how many women have suffered with this*" reflect how the campaign fostered a broader understanding and solidarity. Respondents expressed the view that sexual harassment can affect individuals across a broad spectrum, either through direct person experience of indirectly via the experiences of friends and family members. This is directly relevant to my research question, exhibiting how DA shapes undergraduate women's awareness and engagement with the issue.

Another key theme was the development of empathy and emotional connection. 16% of participants highlighted how reading personal testimonies, upon the platform curated from the #MeToo campaign, enhanced their awareness. One noted that, *“learning about other people’s personal experiences enhanced my awareness,”* while another said, *“it showed me that it can truly happen to anyone”*. These responses suggest that the circulation of testimonies among digital platforms allowed for intimate, affective engagement, increasing emotional investment and the likelihood of activism participation.

Finally, Q21 revealed the theme of increased visibility of the #MeToo movement in mainstream media and public discourse. Several participants described the #MeToo movement as a turning point, with remarks such as, *“the first time I was really aware of the issue being talked about in mainstream media”* and *“the movement gave me and others an excuse and a reason to talk about the issue”*. These statements imply that prior to #MeToo, sexual harassment was often a taboo, under-discussed topic. The campaign assisted the amplification and normalisation of public conversations, legitimising the topic and encouraging wider discourse and engagement.

5.4 Adapted Offline Behaviour

Q23 invited participants to reflect on whether their online behaviour had been influenced by the #MeToo movement and, if so, to describe the nature of these changes. While only 22% reported behavioural changes, this indicates the movement impacted a portion of respondents, though not at a widespread level. This supports the anticipated outcome that DA may not yet consistently translate into offline behavioural change. Nonetheless, three key themes surfaced: increased online engagement and advocacy, heightened awareness and self-reflection, and a strengthened sense of empowerment and confidence to speak out. These themes reflect the complex ways DA may shape behaviour and attitudes, even if such changes are not universally adopted.

Among those who reported behavioural influence, 45% specifically indicated increased online engagement with #MeToo related content, including liking, sharing, and observing associated posts on social media. For example, respondents noted, *“I like and share more posts on the issue to help spread awareness”* and *“I will watch TikToks on the topic”*. This theme demonstrates how DA encourages both passive and active participation, sustaining visibility and momentum. However, such actions can be critiqued as ‘slacktivism’ (Glenn, 2015, p. 81), where minimal online gestures may generate a false sense of contribution without producing meaningful offline change. Still, even superficial engagement plays a role in raising awareness, and contributes to a broader cultural understanding, potentially laying the groundwork for more impactful activism.

Some respondents also reported increased self-awareness in their online actions, likely prompted by a greater understanding of sexual harassment’s pervasiveness. This awareness led to a more thoughtful and respectful behaviour online and offline. One participant reflected that they are, *“being more aware of how to treat others while online”* while another noted that they are, *“more aware in how [they] treat people”*. These responses suggest that DA may foster introspective behavioural shifts, encouraging ethical self-regulation and moral awareness, even if among a minority of users.

Over half of the participants who acknowledged behavioural changes attributed to the #MeToo movement stated that they now feel a greater sense of empowerment, either through sharing personal narratives or by participating more actively in feminist advocacy. One respondent highlighted how they *“now tend to lean towards feminist movements probably stemming from the events of #MeToo”*, suggesting an increased attentiveness to, and engagement with, feminist causes as a result of their exposure to the movement. This indicates that DA can not only raise awareness but also inspire sustained ideological alignment and long-term commitment to social justice initiatives.

5.5 Focus Group Findings

Within the focus group, participants offered valuable insights into how experiences of sexual harassment and engagement with the #MeToo movements have shaped their behaviours and deepened their understanding of the issue. Through a thematic analysis of the focus group transcripts, several recurring codes were revealed, and they were then developed into overarching themes. Key codes included *emotional overwhelm*, *authenticity*, *performativity*, *social media fatigue*, *peer influence* and *engagement type*. From these, three central themes emerged: the emotional labour of digital activism, navigating authenticity and performativity in online spaces, and the translation of offline behavioural changes. These themes reflect the complex ways participants engage with digital activism, particularly in relation to the #MeToo movement, and how these engagements impact their emotions and behaviours.

In relation to the theme of emotional complexity and fatigue, participants articulated a broad spectrum of emotional responses to DA content. During the coding process, several recurring patterns were identified, including feelings of overwhelm, guilt, vulnerability, and emotional exhaustion. These were frequently linked to experiences of emotional triggers and symptoms of activism related burnout, highlighting the psychological impact of sustained engagement with online activism. Each participant gave different views, some saying they “*get overwhelmed. Some stories are really triggering*” (P5, 2025), and others admitting that, “*I feel guilty when I take breaks*” (P1, 2025) and “*activism fatigue is real*” (P4, 2025). These quotes reveal the emotional toll of engaging with activism online, highlighting the psychological strain of constant exposure to traumatic content. However, P1 (2025) explained she “*[feels] empowered when I see people speaking out. It gives me hope...*” which highlights the positive emotional impact of witnessing collective solidarity. This response illustrates how DA can foster a sense of community and shared purpose, which may in turn encourage further engagement.

Another prominent theme that emerged from the focus group discussion was the tension between performative and authentic engagement within DA. Among the participants, there was critical reflection on how DA can feel performative and inauthentic, and predominantly when influencers and celebrities immerse themselves. Throughout the discussion, participants articulated their views by saying that “*it feels like a PR stunt at times*” (P1, 2025), and “*sometimes I think people posting it seems a bit performative*” (P4, 2025). This theme underscores that participants prioritise authentic expression and loved experiences over superficial engagement. It is perceived as inauthentic to discuss an issue once and then fail to revisit or engage with it meaningfully in future interactions with audiences.

In contrast to the survey findings, focus group participants described how the #MeToo movement prompted tangible behavioural changes in their everyday lives. Several participants noted making subtle yet meaningful changes in their daily lives as a result of the #MeToo movement. For instance, one participant reflected, “*I’m more conscious of how I speak about certain topics with friends*” (P1, 2025), while another stated, “*I carry my keys differently now... [and have] shared safety apps with friends*” (P6, 2025). Although these adjustments may appear minor, they illustrate how DA can prompt offline behavioural shifts, suggesting that increased awareness fostered through online campaigns can translate into tangible, protective, and reflective practices in everyday life. However, these shifts do not culminate in forms of real-life activism.

One final theme highlighted the perceived impact and limitations of the #MeToo campaign, as participants queried the long-term impact of the movement. Participants gave mixed views of the outcomes of the campaign; “*It gave me courage to share and it held people accountable*” (P1, 2025); “*It created awareness, but sometimes I worry it stops there*” (P4, 2025); and, “*Some real changes have happened... but I fear that felt a bit like a trend*” (P6, 2025). Participants recognised the importance of raising awareness but expressed scepticism

regarding its long-term sustainability and tangible impact. This reveals an underlying tension between symbolic cultural shifts and meaningful, lasting change. Such concerns may relate to the theme of authenticity versus performativity, suggesting that if much of the awareness generated is perceived as performative rather than genuine, it is unlikely to result in substantive real-world outcomes.

Participants demonstrated a nuanced understanding of DA, showing emotional investment, critical reflection, and awareness of their individual limitations. The data indicates that while #MeToo and similar campaigns can provoke real behavioural change and emotional engagement, they also create pressure, fatigue, and scepticism - especially when activism becomes commercialised or performative.

6 Discussion

Having presented the key findings from both the survey and focus group data, this discussion will now critically interpret the results in relation to the central research question; *how does engagement with DA on social media shape undergraduate women's emotions and their subsequent actions related to social issues, referencing the #MeToo campaign*. Drawing upon theoretical concepts such as boyd (2010) and Schellewald's (2023) networked publics and affordances, and the critique of performative activism (Banet-Weiser, 2012), this section explores the extent to which DA cultivates meaningful engagement, emotional investment, and behavioural change. The discussion is structured thematically, reflecting the core patterns identified in the findings: the emotional labour of activism, the tension between authenticity and performativity, and the translation, or lack thereof, of online activism into offline activism.

6.1 High social media use, and platform preference

My findings reveal that undergraduate women's elevated levels of social media use are closely tied to the affordances of digital platforms, like TikTok. These platforms function to facilitate and shape the ways users engage with DA. boyd (2010) introduced the notion that social networking sites were "popular online hangout spaces" amidst young people and teens, (p. 39). This observation led her to conceptualise social media sites as *networked publics* (NPs) - collectives that are both constituted and shaped by digital and networked technologies, particularly as facilitated by social platforms (p. 39). Publics can be outlined in two ways; one defining it as a certain collective of people, and the other referring to a certain kind of space (Luther, 2014). Digital platforms function as NPs, structured to bring together specific communities within distinct digital environments, which encourage collective discourse and activism among a certain group of individuals. Viewing these platforms as networked publics reveals their design intention to cultivate engagement among like-minded

users. As boyd (2010) further suggests, NPs enable people to “gather for social, cultural and civic purposes”, extending connections “beyond their close family and friends” (p. 39). In this context, DA - such as the #MeToo movement - thrives through these spaces, where individuals converge and participate in collective forms of expression and resistance.

Research indicates that 81% of Generation Z (those born between 1997 and 2012) spend over an hour per day on social media, with 60% reporting usage exceeding three hours daily, and this demonstrates their deep integration into these digital spaces and their potential influence within them. These findings align with my own survey data, in which 95% of respondents are aged between eighteen and twenty-five, situating them firmly within Generation Z. As outlined in the finding section, their reported levels of social media usage further support their embeddedness in the digital spaces where activism occurs.

Abidin (2021) further articulated how NPs were formulated with an initial focus on the “infrastructure and affordances” of media platforms (p. 3). Affordances play a vital role in how users interact with digital platforms, shaping the possibilities for engagement, expression, and participation within those spaces. Hutchby (2001) theorised that affordances “can shape the conditions of possibility associated with an action; it may be possible to do it one way, but not another” (p. 447). In terms of digital platforms and activism, the design and affordances of each platform influences the engagement and spread of activism by shaping how users produce, share and interact with content. These platform specific features, such as algorithms, sharing mechanisms, and visibility settings, can either amplify or limit the reach and impact of activist messaging (Etter & Albu, 2021, p. 69). As Hutchby (2001) further argues, affordances are “functional and relational aspects which frame [...] the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object” (p. 444). This reinforces the idea that the structure and design of digital platforms plays a vital role in shaping activist practices, as they influence how activism is disseminated and engaged with. As highlighted in my findings,

TikTok emerged as the most utilised platform, which may be attributed to its unique affordances that encourage user engagement and participatory practices. TikTok's 'For You Page' algorithm not only amplifies popular content, but also creates serendipitous encounters with activism, which can emotionally resonate and prompt engagement, even from passive users.

Schellewald's (2023) ethnographic fieldwork explores the affordances and rising popularity of TikTok, highlighting how the platform gained prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic by capitalising on a "right place, right time" dynamic (p. 1579). Schellewald (2023) observes that TikTok's algorithm "shapes but never fully determines behaviour" (p. 1571), suggesting that while the platform's design influences user engagement, it does not solely dictate individuals' motivations to participate in DA. This supports van den Berg's (2020, p. 30) findings, which highlight that emotional investment and personal agency remain critical factors for digital activist engagement.

These findings directly address RQ4, illustrating how TikTok's affordances, such as algorithm-driven exposure, ease of content creation, and a participatory culture shape the way undergraduate women engage with DA. Compared to other platforms, TikTok encourages emotional storytelling and bite-sized narratives, which make it particularly effective for engaging users with campaigns like #MeToo.

6.2 Liking and sharing content as activism

Findings from my research revealed that while respondents engaged in DA, their participation was largely limited to actions unlikely to result in tangible social change. This is a consequence of the disconnect between awareness and action throughout social media, known as 'slacktivism' (Glenn, 2015, p. 81). Respondents from the survey claimed they participated in DA through liking posts related to a movement (85% of respondents), and equally, through sharing posts (60% of respondents). These statistics illustrate the shift away

from traditional forms of activism, such as organising protests and rallies (Glenn, 2015, p. 82), towards more passive and ‘lazier’ methods of support commonly associated with contemporary digital engagement (Knibbs, 2013, no pagination). George and Leidner (2019) advocate the view that, although social media is a widely utilised tool for communication, its potential to drive substantial change may be limited as it often facilitates only surface level engagement, such as ‘liking’ activist content.

Ginzburg (2023) contends that, within a political context, so called ‘slacktivist’ actions, such as signing a petition, can yield measurable impact, asserting that such engagement “bring[s] change [that] succeeds by a strictly positive margin” (p. 126). This challenges earlier critiques that dismiss low-risk digital engagement as ineffective, instead suggesting that even minimal actions can contribute meaningfully to broader activist outcomes. Similarly, England (2021) argues further that smaller forms of engagements can still have a significant effect, noting that individuals are often influenced by the desire to conform to social norms. Seeing a friend or family member participate in activism on social media, she suggests, can prompt internal reflection and encourage further engagement (England, 2021, p. 10). Throughout her book, England (2021) suggests realistic and specific actions individuals can partake in to engage meaningfully with social justice causes, and foster change within their communities. England (2021) illustrates the collective power of activism with the metaphor, “One wasp at a picnic is annoying, but a swarm is a game changer” (p. 6), emphasising that while individual actions may have limited impact, it is the collective mobilisation of many that drives meaningful social change.

These perspectives resonate with my survey findings, which show widespread engagement through low effort actions. While these behaviours may not seem impactful in isolation, they reflect a broader cultural trend where visibility, solidarity, and social influence play a role in sustaining activist discourse online. The findings discussed respond to RQ3 by highlighting

the tension between visible online support and limited offline action, though newer perspectives suggest that even minimal digital engagement can collectively contribute to social change. Together, these perspectives reveal a dual reality, while DA often manifests in low-effort actions, the emotional visibility and normative influence of these behaviours may still contribute meaningfully to long-term cultural change. Furthermore, these findings can relate to my primary RQ, as this section shows that even passive engagement, such as liking or sharing, can stem from emotional responses such as solidarity or moral alignment, and may trigger reflection or longer-term behavioural shifts.

6.3 Awareness of Sexual Harassment

Awareness of sexual harassment emerged as a significant theme in both the survey and focus group findings, revealing how DA, particularly the #MeToo movement, has contributed to shifting societal beliefs and increasing visibility around the issue. hooks (2014) introduced the concept of consciousness-raising, the process of political awakening and self-awareness, where individuals come to understand the nature of their oppression, and the structures that uphold it. She emphasised that feminist consciousness-raising involved moving beyond individual experience, but to groups that “provide space for women to explore their sexism” (p. 48), which challenges systems of oppression. Online movements of DA, like #MeToo, provides a ‘space’ for women to partake in consciousness-raising, by increasing collective awareness around sexual harassment. hooks (2014) stressed consciousness-raising began “by focusing on individual experiences” (p. 59), much like how #MeToo has provided a platform for individuals to share personal stories, whilst also aiming to transform these experiences into a collective call for action.

To further this, Harmon and Duffy (2023) introduce the concept of ‘digital consciousness’ originally theorised by Docherty (2021), which is a term used to describe the self-control of technology use, and the role of personal choice and agency over digital participation (Harmon

& Duffy, 2023, p. 541; Docherty, 2021). This aligns with the #MeToo movement, as it illustrates how individuals take control of their engagement with DA. Participants actively choose to raise awareness, or to interact with content related to sexual harassment, by sharing their experiences or supporting the movement through reposts and sharing. As users become more conscious of the issues and choose to engage, they not only increase the own awareness but contribute to the wider discourse, fostering greater public recognition of sexual harassment.

Additionally, Papacharissi (2014) introduces the concept of *affective publics*, referring to “networked public formations that are mobilized and connected/disconnected through expressions of sentiment” (p. 126). While hooks (2014) highlights the power of consciousness-raising in collective feminist spaces, Papacharissi’s (2014) affective publics show how digital platforms amplify this process, translating emotional testimonies into collective action that shapes public discourse. Within the context of #MeToo, these affective publics are clear in the emotional testimonies shared online, which foster empathy, solidarity, and a sense of collective identification among users. Such affective engagement enhances emotional resonance and encourages individuals to participate in the movement, often as a means of supporting those who have shared their experiences. Mendes et al. (2019) highlight how “feminist action is often exhausting and draining” (p. 74), emphasising the emotional labour involved in sharing personal experiences, which further underscores the importance of affective publics in sustaining engagement and raising awareness through shared vulnerability and collective support. This section responds directly to the primary research question by illustrating how emotional engagement and awareness, rooted in feminist and digital theories of consciousness and affect, drive undergraduate women to engage with the #MeToo campaign, and recognise broader patterns of structural oppression.

6.4 Performative versus Authentic Activism

Focus group participants expressed concerns that much of the activism they encounter online may be performative rather than a reflection of genuine commitment. Thimsen (2022) defines performative activism as a behaviour that, “talks the talk but doesn’t walk the walk” (p. 84), referring to the act of sharing content related to social movements without engaging in meaningful or sustained efforts to support the cause. This form of activism may contribute to a culture of individuals feeling they have contributed to a cause simply by liking or sharing posts, without any tangible actions that drive real world change. This observation aligns with findings from my focus group, where participants indicated a sense of scepticism about the authenticity of online activism, particularly when it appeared to be driven by personal branding rather than a true desire to effect change.

Butler (2011) proposed the theory of performativity, where she suggests that gender is an ‘act’, and it is not an innate feature, but something that is ‘acquired’ throughout life (p. 151). Butler (2011) highlights that gender should not be “conceived as a noun or a substantial thing”, but as a series of repeated acts that constitute identity (p. 152). Just as gender is enacted through repeated performances, engagement with DA can become performative, with users mimicking the language and visuals of activism to align with expectations rather than conviction. It could be argued that some women may engage with #MeToo content online, but also as a performative act that aligns with socially constructed expectations of feminist identity. Gill (2007) highlights how women are encoded to seem “compelled to use their empowered postfeminist position to make choices” (p. 265), which suggests that their engagement with activism can be shaped by wider cultural discourses that frame agency as a moral imperative. In this sense, participating in DA may function as both a form of self-presentation and a way to affirm one’s alignment with feminist values, particularly in highly visible digital spaces where identity is continually negotiated (Yau et al., 2019, p. 555).

Banet-Weiser (2012) builds on the concept of performativity by examining brand culture, arguing that brands are “ubiquitous, [and] embedded in every aspect of our lives and relationships” (p. 5). In the context of DA, influencers often brand themselves in a similar way, presenting themselves as invested in causes like #MeToo, aligning their personal image with activism to further cultivate and commodify their online personas. This branding process not only serves to enhance their visibility and authenticity, but also reflects a deeper economic strategy where influencers use “brand management strategies, self-promotion and advertising techniques” (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 55). In doing so, they position themselves as socially conscious figures, thereby aligning their personal brand with the expectations of feminist identity and social justice movements.

This aligns with findings from my research, where participants indicated that they were often influenced by the way influencers present themselves as advocates for causes like #MeToo, suggesting a perceived authenticity that may in turn shape individuals’ own engagement with activism. However, as observed in the focus group, some participants questioned the genuineness of such online displays, expressing concerns that influencer involvement in activism might be more performative than substantive. Furthermore, this contributes to my primary research question, which is addressed through participants’ emotional responses to performative activism, revealing how scepticism can either discourage deeper engagement or provoke reflection on one’s own values. Additionally, it starts to answer RQ2 by showing that participation is not always ideologically driven; it may be shaped by performance, peer influence, or brand-aligned self-representation.

The lack of authenticity felt amongst individuals within my findings can generate questions regarding the movement's capacity to produce sustained, structural change over time. Idowu (2022) argues that while DA may achieve incremental or symbolic victories, it rarely translates into substantive structural transformation (p. 539). This aligns with concerns raised

in both the survey and focus groups, where participants expressed scepticism about the long-term impact of online activism, especially when it appears driven more by visibility and self-promotion than by genuine commitment. When activism is perceived as performative, it can dilute the political power of movements like #MeToo (Thimsen, 2022), hinder collective organising efforts, and potentially contribute to public fatigue or disengagement (Mendes et al., 2019, p. 74), thereby stalling broader societal reform.

6.5 Empowerment in #MeToo

Another prominent theme that emerged from the data is the notion of empowerment, particularly as it relates to hashtag feminism, such as #MeToo. Within the digital landscape, campaigns such as this have not only fostered awareness but have also functioned as tools of empowerment, enabling women to voice their experiences and reclaim agency in spaces historically marked by silence and stigma. Zimmerman (1995) accentuates Rappaport's (1987) concept that empowerment is a process by which people, organisations and communities gain mastery over issues of concern to them (Rappaport, 1987 in Zimmerman, 1995, p. 581). Zimmerman (1995) established psychological empowerment, which refers to "empowerment at the individual level of analysis" and it integrates "perceptions of personal control, a proactive approach to life, and a critical understanding of the sociopolitical environment" (p. 581). This framework aligns with findings from both the survey and focus groups, where participants described feeling more confident and supported in sharing their experiences or engaging with content related to #MeToo. Zimmerman (1995) highlighted that psychological empowerment includes "active engagement in one's community" (p. 582), which is evident within DA and social movements.

In the context of DA, this 'active engagement' is manifested through practices such as sharing testimonies, amplifying others' voices, and participating in conversations that challenge dominant narratives around gender and power. The findings suggest that for many

undergraduate women, #MeToo functions as a digital community where they can express solidarity, validate one another's experiences, and develop a stronger sense of agency.

However, while this engagement fosters psychological empowerment, it is important to consider whether such empowerment is sustained over time or limited to the digital sphere, particularly when structural barriers to reporting or justice remain unaddressed.

Hashtag feminism has facilitated the emergence of new digital spaces that enable silenced and marginalised groups to engage more actively in feminist movements (Higgs, 2015, as cited in Clark, 2016, p. 789). According to Clark (2016), the hashtag functions as an "easily personalised storytelling prompt" (p. 796), which can empower women to articulate individual experiences and share them publicly. These narrative prompts often centre survivors of sexual harassment (p. 796), fostering a sense of solidarity among women, and encouraging broader participation within the movement. In this context, digital participation reconfigures traditional notions of activism by dismantling institutional and logistical barriers, thereby enabling wider and more inclusive engagement in feminist discourse (Mendes et al., 2019).

This theme aligns most strongly with the primary RQ, as it highlights how engagement with DA fostered emotional responses such as confidence, validation, and a sense of solidarity among undergraduate women. The findings also partially address RQ3, suggesting that feelings of empowerment, which can be disseminated through hashtags, can encourage individuals to speak out and support others. However, while these emotional shifts are significant, the data also rose questions about whether such empowerment consistently translates into long-term offline action or structural change.

7 Conclusion

This dissertation set out to critically examine the emotional and participatory dimensions of digital activism, with a specific focus on how undergraduate women, in the UK, engage with feminist campaigns such as #MeToo. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the ways in which digital platforms mediate affective responses and shape patterns of engagement with social justice issues. This research offers a timely and necessary contribution to the evolving field of digital activism by centring the voices of UK undergraduate women - a demographic that is both digitally native and socially aware (Loader et al., 2014; Banet-Weiser, 2018). While existing scholarship has explored the broader societal impact of movements like #MeToo (Clark, 2016; Gill & Orgad, 2018; Mendes et al., 2018), a gap remains in understanding how specific populations emotionally engage with and act upon these digital campaigns.

7.1 Summary of Main Findings

To summarise, this dissertation uncovered key aspects of the emotional and behavioural impacts of DA, revealing the empowering potential and the emotional labour involved in online feminist participation. Among all respondents, only 5% reported having no awareness of DA, while the majority (85%) indicated that they had engaged in some form of DA. This ranged from low-effort actions such as liking posts to more active forms of participation, including creating and sharing content expressing their own views. These findings underscore the extent to which digital platforms have become embedded in contemporary activist practices, particularly among undergraduate women. Furthermore, respondents indicated that exposure to personal testimonies deepened their emotional connection to the movement, highlighting how the campaign cultivated a strong sense of solidarity among women, particularly through emotionally evocative stories. This directly relates to my primary RQ, as heightened emotional responses appear to play a key role in motivating behavioural change.

When individuals are emotionally impacted, they are more inclined to take action, whether through sharing content, engaging in dialogue, or altering their offline behaviour. These findings suggest that digital activism's power lies not only in its reach, but in its capacity to elicit affective engagement that can translate into meaningful responses.

Throughout the focus group, participant responses fabricated themes, such as authenticity versus performativity, emotional labour, and the translation of activism from online to offline. Participant's reflections offered valuable insights into the emotional responses and behavioural shifts provoked by DA. For instance, one participant noted, '[I] get overwhelmed. Some stories are really triggering,' illustrating the psychological toll that sustained exposure to activist content can have. Another commented, 'it feels like a PR stunt as times,' highlighting scepticism towards the perceived performative nature of some DA content. In contrast, tangible behavioural changes were also evident, such as: 'I carry my keys differently [...], [and have] shared safety apps with my friends,' demonstrating how DA can influence everyday practices and enhance personal safety awareness.

7.2 Theoretical Reflections

This study was grounded in theoretical frameworks that offered a lens through which to examine the emotional and behavioural impact of DA. Abidin (2021), Hutchby (2001) and boyd (2010) highlighted how the affordances and structures of digital platforms influence how users engage with content and communicate online. These scholars emphasised the ways in which digital platforms enable or constrain particular forms of interactions, due to their individual affordances, which vary across different digital platforms. In doing so, these scholars underscore how the varying affordances of digital platforms not only shape the nature of online interactions, but also contribute to the emotional and behavioural shifts observed in users' engagement with DA.

Glenn (2015) and Knibbs (2013) initiated the conversations highlighting the concept of 'slacktivism'. This concept is particularly relevant, as the findings indicated that many participants engaged in forms of 'slacktivism', such as liking or sharing digital activist content, which while signalling support, may lack tangible real-world impact. Additionally, Banet-Weiser (2012) and Butler (2011) explore the concept of performativity, highlighting how a perceived lack of authenticity in some digital activism can undermine its capacity to drive meaningful real-world change. Participants viewed influencers' contributions to the #MeToo movement as performative, often interpreting them as strategic self-branding efforts to enhance their appeal, but in turn, it creates distrust with influencers, potentially minimising the full potential of impact.

Together, these theoretical perspectives help contextualise the study's findings, revealing how platform-specific dynamics and perceptions of authenticity influence both emotional engagement and the potential for digital activism to translate into meaningful offline change.

7.3 Limitations of Research

While this study provides meaningful insights into undergraduate women's engagement with DA, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations that may have influence the scope and interpretation of findings. One limitation of this study is the sample size. While 62 participants completed this survey, this falls short of the 385 responses needed for a statistically representative sample of UK female undergraduates. However, such a target is often unattainable for low-budget, small-scale university research. Despite this, the findings offer valuable exploratory insights and reveal meaningful patterns.

Furthermore, potential bias may have been introduced within the focus groups due to the self-selection recruitment method, as participants who chose to take part may have has a pre-existing interest in DA, potentially influencing the nature and depth of the discussion.

Despite these limitations, the research offers valuable contributions to the understanding of how digital activism influences emotional and behavioural responses among undergraduate women.

7.4 Future Research Avenues

The insights provided from this research can serve as a foundation for future, larger-scale studies seeking to further explore this evolving area of DA engagement in digital spaces. This research could serve as a foundation for comparative studies exploring the emotional and behavioural impact of digital activism across different age groups or global regions, and perhaps specific platforms. Expanding the participant demographic in future research could reveal key differences in engagement with and impact of DA.

Additionally, longitudinal studies could be established from this study, tracking emotional and behavioural changes because of DA across a specific length of time. As Menard (2002, p. 9) suggests, longitudinal studies are key to proving causality, which would add greater scientific rigour beyond the correlational insights offered by this study. This would offer deeper insight into the evolution of emotional and behavioural changes over time, as well as shifts in social media usage and platform preferences.

Together, these future directions could enrich understanding of DA's impact and ensure more nuanced, inclusive, and robust research moving forward.

7.5 Final Reflection

This dissertation has illuminated the nuanced emotional and behavioural dimensions of DA among undergraduate women in the UK, with a particular focus on movements such as #MeToo. By centring the voices of a digitally native demographic, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how digital platforms can both empower and emotionally burden users. Despite limitations, this research offers valuable insights into how affective engagement

online can influence real world behaviour. This study underscores the importance of context, authenticity, and platform design in shaping DA, and provides a meaningful foundation for future inquiry in this rapidly evolving field.

In an era where digital spaces shape not only how we speak out, but how we feel and act, this research affirms that DA is not just a tool for awareness - it is a catalyst for emotional resonance and real-world change. While these shifts may currently appear incremental, the continued growth of DA among platform users holds the potential to drive significant cultural and institutional change, particularly in areas such as sexual harassment, where visibility, solidarity, and sustained pressure are crucial for achieving justice.

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9 Appendices

9.1 Appendix A: Completed Ethics Form

SCHOOL OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION
FACULTY OF ARTS, HUMANITIES AND CULTURES



COMM3910 Communication Dissertation / COMM5600M Dissertation and Research Methods Ethical Review Form

1. Basic project details

Your name	Rosie Husson
Student ID	201612375
Name of supervisor	Julie Firmstone
Provisional title/ topic area	Digital Activism relating to the #MeToo movement

Ethical review is required for all research carried out in the University involving people (human participants), including research undertaken by students within a taught student module. Further details of the University of Leeds ethical review requirements are given in the Research Ethics Policy available at: <https://secretariat.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/109/2023/12/Research-ethics-policy.pdf>.

For ethical approval on this module, you should discuss research ethics with your supervisor and ask them to review and approve this form. You must submit your form with your supervisor's signature to the submissions area in Minerva by the published deadline (see module handbook), or before you begin fieldwork (whichever is soonest). **Please note that you must not commence fieldwork until this form has been approved and signed by your supervisor and the module leader if necessary.** You must complete this form even if your research does not involve people.

Please note that you must NOT complete research with participants who are under 18, unable to give 'informed consent', or are 'vulnerable' (e.g., prisoners, asylum seekers, the homeless). This module does not have ethical approval for research with these groups. Also, you must NOT store any participant data on your personal devices. All data related to research participants must be stored on your University One Drive storage facility.

Further Research Ethics Guidance for Dissertations is available in Minerva. Please refer to this Guidance when completing this form.

2. Summarise the aims, objectives, and method of the research (max 300 words).

Provide a summary of the research, outlining the aims and objectives and / or research questions and the proposed methodology. Please explain how you will conduct the research (e.g., how will research participants be identified and recruited and what will they be asked to do, or for online research, how will people's data be selected, used, and analysed?)

This study aims to examine participants' reactions to and engagement with digital and hashtag activism, with a particular focus on the #MeToo movement. Within this research, I would like to investigate how engagement with the #MeToo campaign, specifically on social media, shapes undergraduate women's emotions and their subsequent actions related to social issues. Regarding methodology, for this study I am to conduct a survey to acknowledge a primary insight into participant's thoughts and feelings within this topic. Subsequently, I will conduct a focus group, stemming from the initial surveys, to gain a deeper perception of how each participant feels. Within the surveys, the participants will not be identifiable unless they choose to participate within the focus group. At the end of the survey, participants will be asked to provide their email if they would agree to partake within the focus group. When referring to participants within the focus group, they will be given pseudo names, so that other participants are not able to identify other participants.

Data will be analysed differently within the focus group and the surveys. The surveys will produce mostly quantitative data, and so statistical methods such as the mean, and mode will be used to analyse the results. In the focus group, I intend to record the conversations, create transcripts and carry out a thematic analysis on the answers and conversations had.

3. Confirm if you plan to conduct fieldwork with (data on) people

	Yes	No
Will your dissertation involve conducting research on people (this includes online research methods and researching data on people / secondary data analysis)? Tick as appropriate.	X	

If you ticked **No** to Question 3, you do not need to take further action in respect of ethical approval. Please proceed to the declarations in **Part C**.

If you ticked **Yes** to Question 3, you need to complete **Part A**.



Part A: Ethical Considerations Raised by Your Research

4. What is the source of the data used in your research? (Indicate with an 'X' all that apply)

New data collected for this research	X
Data previously collected	
Data already in the public domain (including Internet-based research)	
Other, please state:	

5. How will the data be collected? (Indicate with an 'X' all that apply)

Through one-to-one research interviews	
Through focus groups	X
Self-completion (e.g. questionnaires, surveys, diaries)	X
Through observation	
Data previously collected	
Data already in the public domain	
Other, please state:	

6. Personal safety: risk assessment

	Yes	No
Will your fieldwork be outside the University campus?		X

If you answer Yes to Q. 6 you will need to complete a separate risk assessment form and send this to your supervisor to review. Supervisors will need to approve the risk assessment before signing this form.

7. Will the project involve any of the following (Tick as appropriate)
(Please check the Dissertation Research Ethics Guidance Notes when completing this section)

	Yes	No
Discussion of sensitive topics, or topics that could be considered sensitive	X	
Prolonged or frequent participant involvement		X
Researching people without their knowledge and consent		X
Cause potential harm to participants or others (including researcher(s))		X
Potential conflicts of interest		X
Researcher(s) in a position of authority over participants		X

Cooperation of an intermediary to gain access to research participants or material		X
Internet-based research or other visual / vocal methods where participants may be identified who may not expect their communication to be accessed by third parties:		X
Translators or interpreters (other than self)		X
Fieldwork taking place outside the UK [See point 3 Personal Safety above]		X
Other (please state):		

NB: you must NOT complete research with participants who are under 18, unable to give 'informed consent', or are 'vulnerable' (e.g., prisoners, asylum seekers, the homeless).

8. Research data management

Will the research involve any of the following activities at any stage (including identification of potential research participants)? (Please check the Dissertation Ethics Guidance Notes when completing this section)	Yes	No
a. Examination of personal records by those who would not normally have access		X
b. Sharing data with other		X
c. Use of personal contact details other than email and telephone numbers (e.g. postcodes, faxes, home / work address)		X
d. Publication of direct quotations from respondents	X	
e. Publication of data that might allow individuals to be identified		X
f. Use of audio / visual recording devices	X	
Explain in this textbox what will happen to the data you collect once you have completed the module: I intend on storing the data within a separate, encrypted folder on my University One Drive for the duration of the module. Once I have completed the module, and my dissertation has been submitted, I intend to delete the encrypted folder from my University One Drive. The data will not be stored within my encrypted folder for more than three months. This adheres to the universities ethical guidelines.		

NB: You must NOT store data on your personal devices: all data related to research participants must be stored on your University One Drive storage facility

If you answered **Yes** to any of the items in Questions 7 and 8, please ensure you complete Part B of this form which requires you to explain how you will conduct your research ethically. As noted above, if you answered Yes to Question 6, you must complete the separate risk assessment form and send this to your supervisor to review before signing this form.

If you answered **No** to all the items in Questions 7 and 8, you do NOT need to complete Part B of this form. Please now complete Part C.



Part B: Addressing the Ethical Considerations Raised

9. For the ethical considerations indicated in Questions 7 and 8 in Part A of this form, provide further details and explain how these issues will be addressed. Please refer as appropriate to the Dissertation Research Ethics Guidance Notes, and the University's [Research Ethics Policy](#), the module reading list, and other resources on ethics and good practice in research available in Minerva.

Response to ethical considerations identified in Question 7:

Within my research, I believe that the topic I have chosen can be sensitive. I will be referring to the #MeToo movement throughout my research, which is a campaign that encourages society to speak out about their own sexual violence/harassment experiences. To notify the participants about the sensitive nature of the topic, I intend to put a disclaimer at the beginning of the survey, before the section on informed consent. Furthermore, I will explain how the participants have the right to withdraw from the study whenever they feel necessary without any consequences. This will also be highlighted at the beginning of the focus groups as well, to reiterate the potential sensitive topics and that participants can withdraw whenever they feel, if they need to.

I will also ensure that I receive fully informed consent from all participants that participate within this study. I will thoroughly set out the aims and objectives of the study, as well as reinforcing how the data will be used before gaining consent from the participants.

Response to data-management considerations identified in Question 8:

Within my analysis, I feel it would be necessary to provide direct quotations from my participants to ensure authenticity and credibility within my analysis. However, I am aware the ethical implications that can arise from this. To ensure that my research stays in line with the university's ethical guidelines, I intend to not use any quotations that could potentially reveal the identity of participants, whilst also not using names for participants, but simply participant 1, 2 and so on.

Furtherly, I intend on voice recording the conversations that occur within the focus groups. I have chosen to do this, so I am able to correctly and efficiently write up transcripts of the conversations. The voice recordings will be stored within an encrypted folder on the University's One Drive and will be deleted once I have written the transcripts, so I cannot identify participants from their voices. Each participant will randomly be allocated a number which will be used within the transcript, and within my dissertation analysis.

Part C: Dissertation Research Ethical Approval: Declaration

Student declaration (for all students)	Tick as appropriate
I confirm that the research ethics form is accurate to the best of my knowledge.	☒
I have consulted the University of Leeds Research Ethics Policy available at https://secretariat.leeds.ac.uk/research-ethics/university-protocols-and-policies/ and the dissertation research ethics guidance notes.	☒
I understand that ethical approval will only apply to the project I have outlined in this application and that I will need to re-apply, should my plans change substantially.	☒
If my research will be conducted outside the University campus, I am aware that I need to complete the separate risk assessment form and send this to my supervisor to review.	☒
For students conducting research with (data on) people	
I am aware of the University of Leeds protocols for ethical research, particularly in respect to protocols on informed consent, verbal consent, reimbursement for participants and low risk observation. If any are applicable to me, signing this form confirms that I will carry out my work in accordance with them.	☒

Student's signature:ROSIE HUSSON.....

Date:12/03/2025.....

For Supervisors	Tick as appropriate
No further action required	
I confirm that the dissertation project is in line with the Guidelines for COMM5800M Dissertation and Research Ethics / COMM3910 Communication Dissertation.	☒
I have discussed the ethical issues arising from the research with the student and their risk assessment (if necessary) and I agree that all issues have been accurately and fully addressed at the time of signing this form.	☒
Further actions required	
Refer to module leader for further review.	

Supervisor's signature:
.....

Date:20/03/25.....

9.2 Appendix B: Informed Consent for Online Self-Completion Survey

Fully Informed Consent

Thank you for choosing to take part in this survey. This research explores the effects of digital activism, in relation to the #MeToo movement, particularly focusing on the thoughts and actions taken due to the campaign. This survey will contain questions asking about social media, digital activism, and the #MeToo movement.

My dissertation project corroborates with the University of Leeds ethical guidelines. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time before submitting your responses, without consequence.

All responses will remain anonymous and confidential. This survey will not collect any personal data, apart from your email address if you apply to partake in the online focus groups. As this information is taken at the end of the survey, your responses will remain anonymous. The data collected will be solely for academic purposes in my undergraduate dissertation. It will be deleted once my dissertation is complete. By proceeding with this survey, you confirm that you have read this statement, understand the purpose of the research, and consent to participate.

If you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact me at me22ramh@leeds.ac.uk or my dissertation supervisor, Professor Julie Firmstone at j.a.firmstone@leeds.ac.uk.

Page 3 of 8

1. Do you consent to participate in this survey? *

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

9.3 Appendix C: Online Self-Completion Survey Questions

Research Outline

My name is Rosie, I am a final year student in the School of Media and Communication, at the University of Leeds. For my final year dissertation, I am researching into the effects of digital activism, in relation to the #MeToo movement. Throughout this study, I aim to gain insights into individual's thoughts and feelings surrounding digital activism, social media, and the #MeToo campaign. Within my research, I will only be studying undergraduate women in the UK. Secondary to this survey, I will be conducting two online focus groups. A focus group is a guided discussion within a small group of four to six participants, used to gain in depth insights in a particular field. At the end of this survey, you will be asked if you would be willing to partake in the online focus groups. Please follow the instructions, when applicable, if you would like to partake in these discussions.

Content Warning: Sexual Harassment

Please be aware that this survey asks you to think about themes related to sexual harassment and violence, as it focuses on the #MeToo movement. If you feel uncomfortable with this topic, please consider whether you wish to proceed with the survey. Your well-being is important, and you are free to withdraw at any time.

Fully Informed Consent

Thank you for choosing to take part in this survey. This research explores the effects of digital activism, in relation to the #MeToo movement, particularly focusing on the thoughts and actions taken due to the campaign. This survey will contain questions asking about social media, digital activism, and the #MeToo movement. My dissertation project corroborates with the University of Leeds ethical guidelines. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time before submitting your responses, without consequence. All responses will remain anonymous and confidential. This survey will not collect any personal data, apart from your email address if you apply to partake in the online focus groups. As this information is taken at the end of the survey, your responses will remain anonymous. The data collected will be solely for academic purposes in my undergraduate dissertation. It will be deleted once my dissertation is complete. By proceeding with this survey, you confirm that you have read this statement, understand the purpose of the research, and consent to participate. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact me at me22ramh@leeds.ac.uk or my dissertation supervisor, Professor Julie Firmstone at j.a.firmstone@leeds.ac.uk.

1. Do you consent to participate in this survey?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

General Questions

2. What gender do you identify with?
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. Non-Binary
 - d. Prefer not to say
 - e. Other
3. If you selected Other, please tell us here:
4. What is your age?
 - a. 18 - 21
 - b. 22 - 25
 - c. 26 and over
5. Are you an undergraduate student in the UK?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

Social Media

6. Do you use social media?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
7. If you selected 'Yes', how often would you say you use social media?
 - a. Less than 1 hour per day
 - b. 1 - 3 hours per day
 - c. 4 - 7 hours per day
 - d. More than 7 hours per day
8. What social media do you use? Select all that are applicable.
 - a. Instagram
 - b. Tiktok
 - c. Snapchat
 - d. Facebook
 - e. X (Twitter)
 - f. WhatsApp
 - g. Other
9. If you selected Other, please tell us here:
10. Out of these social media platforms, which do you use the most?
 - a. Instagram
 - b. TikTok
 - c. Snapchat
 - d. Facebook
 - e. X (Twitter)
 - f. WhatsApp

g. Other

11. If you selected Other, please tell us here:

Digital Activism

Digital activism involves the use of online platforms, particularly social media, to share information, spark discussion, and raise awareness about social issues with the goal of creating change. It allows individuals and groups to mobilise support, challenge injustices, and influence public opinion. This could be through liking and commenting on social media posts, creating your own content to support your views, joining online forums and discussing issues etc.

12. How familiar are you with the term 'digital activism'?

- a. Very familiar
- b. Somewhat familiar
- c. Not familiar at all

13. Please read the definition of digital activism at the top of the page. Have you ever participated in digital activism?

- a. Yes
- b. No

14. If you answered 'Yes' to Q13, how so?

- a. Liking posts related to a movement
- b. Commenting on posts related to a movement
- c. Sharing a post related to a movement
- d. Posting your own views on social media via written content
- e. Posting your own views on social media via video content
- f. Other

15. If you selected Other, please tell us here:

16. How often would you participate in digital activism mentioned in Q14?

- a. Multiple times a day
- b. Every day
- c. A few times a week
- d. Monthly
- e. Rarely ever
- f. Never

17. What motivates you to engage in digital activism? Select all that apply.

- a. Raising awareness
- b. Showing solidarity
- c. Personal experience with said issue
- d. Encouragement from peers or influencer

18. If selected Other, please tell us here:

Digital Activism and #MeToo

The #MeToo campaign is a social movement that emerged against sexual harassment and assault, encouraging survivors to share their experiences, particularly on digital platforms. Originally coined by Tarana Burke in 2006, it gained global recognition in 2017 when it went viral on social media. The movement aims to raise awareness, foster solidarity, and advocate for change in how society addresses sexual violence.

19. Were you aware of sexual harassment before the #MeToo movement, and to what extent?
 - a. I was very aware and understood the seriousness of the issue
 - b. I was somewhat aware and knew that it was a problem
 - c. I knew about it but did not realise how common it was
 - d. I had heard about it but did not understand what it meant
 - e. I was not aware
20. Did the #MeToo movement enhance your awareness in any way?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
21. If so, in what way did it enhance your awareness? (put n/a is not applicable)
 - a. Comment box.
22. Has the #MeToo movement influenced your own actions or behaviour in any way online?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
23. If you answered 'Yes' to Q22, how have your actions been influenced? (put n/a is not applicable)
24. Do you think digital activism makes it easier for people to speak out about their experiences with harassment?
 - a. Yes, social media provides a safe space for survivors to share their stories
 - b. Somewhat, but there are still challenges and risks in speaking out
 - c. No, online platforms are not safe or supportive enough for survivors
 - d. I am unsure
25. Do you believe that digital activism, like the #MeToo campaign leads to societal change?
 - a. Yes, it has a significant impact on policies and social policies
 - b. Somewhat, it raises awareness but has limited real world impact
 - c. No, online/digital activism do not create meaningful change
 - d. I am unsure

Thank you

Thank you for participating within this study. Your responses will be stored within my University of Leeds One Drive and deleted once my dissertation has been submitted and completed. Thank you again for your time. If you would be willing to take part in a focus group to discuss these issues, please enter your email below. Other than your email address, this survey has not collected any details about your identity, which ensures your responses

will be anonymous. The focus groups will take place sometime between April 10th, 2025, and April 14th, 2025, and I will be in contact by the 5th of April to invite you to attend. You are not obliged to accept my invitation, and I appreciate your interest in taking part.

26. Would you like to participate within the focus group for this research? Please enter your email here and I will contact you.

9.4 Appendix D: Focus Group Participant Information Sheet

School of Media and Communication



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Focus Group Participant Information Sheet

Breaking the Silence: How Digital Activism Shapes Undergraduate Women's Emotions and Actions towards Social Issues, with reference to #MeToo

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide if you wish to take part.

A qualitative study into how the #MeToo movement has shaped emotional relationships and responses between undergraduate women and sexual violence. This study includes a focus group, stemming from surveys conducted prior, where participants will endure in a semi-structured conversation in which the researcher will prompt the participants with questions surrounding this topic. The focus group will range between forty-five minutes, and one hour, depending on the depth and detail the group intend to delve to. This conversation will provide a deeper insight into the ways in which digital activism shapes individuals' thoughts and emotions regarding sexual harassment, and #MeToo.

Why have I been chosen?

Participation in this focus group is based on self-selection. This you volunteered to take part after conducting the survey sent out prior. You were not directly approached or chosen individually by the researcher.

You are eligible to take part because you are:

- An undergraduate student at a UK university
- A woman
- Aged 18 or over

How We Will Use Your Information (Data Protection and Privacy Notice)

Your participation in this research is voluntary, and your personal data will be processed in accordance with the University of Leeds ethical and data protection policies. A full explanation of how your data will be used can be found in the Universities [Privacy Notice for Research](#). Below is a summary of the key information:

- **Who is collecting the data:** The data is being collected by the student researcher Rosie Husson, an undergraduate in the School of Media and Communication at the University of Leeds, under the supervision of Professor Julie Firmstone.
- **Where the data is being collected from:** Data will be collected from participants during the focus group session, which will be audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Any demographic information or contextual comments shared during the session will also form part of the dataset.
- **What will be done with the data:**
 - The data will be securely stored on password protected University systems, such as the researchers University of Leeds One Drive.
 - Transcripts will be anonymised to remove any personally identifying information.



- o The data will be used solely for the purposes of this undergraduate dissertation project, and will be deleted upon completion and submission of the project.

If you have any questions about how your data will be used to wish to withdraw at any time, please contact Rosie Husson, at me22ramh@leeds.ac.uk.

Rights as a data subject

'The UK GDPR provides you with the following rights in relation to your personal data:

- *The right to access the data we hold about you*
- *The right to rectify the data we hold about you*
- *The right to have the data we hold about you erase.*
- *The right to restrict how we process your data.*
- *The right to data portability*
- *The right to object to us processing the data we hold about you*

Please note the extent to which these rights apply may vary and, in some circumstances, rights may be restricted when the data is being used for research purposes. We will always try to respond to concerns or queries that you may have. If you wish to exercise these rights, please contact us using the information provided in 'Contact for further information' section below':

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide if you wish to take part or not. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time without it affecting any benefits that you are entitled to in any way. You do not have to give a reason.

Withdrawing from the study

Participants may withdraw prior to or during the focus group, however, due to the conversational nature of a focus group it will not be possible to withdraw any contributions already provided.

Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

The audio and/or video recordings of your activities made during this research will be used only for analysis and for illustration in conference presentations and lectures. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

Use, dissemination and storage of research data

The information you provide during the focus group will be solely used for the purposes of this undergraduate dissertation, which explores how digital activism affects undergraduate women's emotions and actions.

The data will be anonymised, meaning your name and any identifying details will be removed or changed to protect your identity. Only the researcher will have access to the full, original recordings and transcripts. An anonymised summary of findings may be shared in the final dissertation.

All data will be securely stored on a password protected University of Leeds OneDrive account. Audio recordings will be deleted once transcribed, and all data will be permanently deleted no later than September 30th, 2025.



Your participation is confidential, and no individual will be identifiable in any report or output produced.

What will happen to my personal information?

Your personal information will be handled in line with the University of Leeds data protection policies and the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR).

Any personal data you provide – such as your name, age, or anything shared during the focus group – will be kept strictly confidential and stored securely on a password protected University of Leeds OneDrive account. Your name will not appear in any published materials; instead, a pseudonym will be used, and any identifying details will be removed.

What type of information will be sought from me and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research project's objectives?

During the focus group, you will be asked about your views and experiences relating to digital activism, with a particular focus on the #MeToo movement. This includes your emotional responses to online activism, how you engage with such content on social media platforms, and whether these interactions influence your awareness or actions regarding social issues like sexual harassment.

This information is essential to the research project, which aims to explore how undergraduate women interpret and are affected by digital activism. By understanding your perspectives and experiences, the study can gain deeper insights into the emotional and behavioural impact of online campaigns such as #MeToo.

Your input will directly contribute to the research objectives and help develop a more nuanced understanding of how digital activism operates within the lives of young women today.

Contact for further information

If you have any questions or would like further information about this research project, please feel free to contact:

Rosie Husson
School of Media and Communication
University of Leeds
Me22ramh@leeds.ac.uk

This research is being conducted under the supervision of:

Professor Julie Firmstone
School of Media and Communication
University of Leeds
J.a.firmstone@leeds.ac.uk

Concerns or Complaints

Participants with any concerns or complaints should be advised to contact the PI/CI/Research Team for a local resolution in the first instance and if there are any issues or concerns about which participants remain dissatisfied, then the Research Ethics Team should be contacted via ResearchEthics@leeds.ac.uk who will then consider next steps.

Thank you for taking the time to read through this Participant Information Sheet. If you decide to take part in the study, you will be sent a copy of this information sheet for your records. You will also receive a copy of your signed consent form, should you agree to participate.

We appreciate your time and consideration in supporting this research.

<i>Project title</i>	<i>Document type</i>	<i>Version #</i>	<i>Date</i>
Breaking the Silence: How Digital Activism Shapes Undergraduate Women's Emotions and Actions towards Social Issues, with reference to #MeToo	Participant Information Sheet	1	05/04/25

9.5 Appendix E: Focus Group Consent Form Example

School of Media and Communication



Participant Consent to take part in [Breaking the Silence: How Digital Activism Shapes Women's Emotional Responses to Sexual Harassment, with reference to #MeToo]

A qualitative study into how the #MeToo movement has shaped emotional relationships and responses between undergraduate women and sexual violence. This study includes a focus group, stemming from surveys conducted prior, where participants will endure in a semi-structured conversation in which the researcher will prompt the participants with questions surrounding this topic. The focus group will range between forty-five minutes, and one hour, depending on the depth and detail the group intend to delve to. This conversation will provide a deeper insight into the ways in which digital activism shapes individuals' thoughts and emotions regarding sexual violation, and #MeToo.

If you agree to the statement, please sign with your initials below

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences.	
In addition, should I not wish to answer any question or questions, I am free to decline. Any data already provided following withdrawal from the study will be deleted immediately.	
I understand members of the research team [and any authorised parties as identified in the PIS] will have access to my identifiable responses.	
Following the publication of the research project, all collected data will be deleted from One Drive, where it will be stored in line with the University of Leeds guidelines.	
Where my data has been anonymised, I understand I will not be identified or identifiable in the report/s or publications that result from the research.	
Where my data is identifiable, I understand that I can request removal from the dataset at any time by contacting Rosie Husson.	
I understand that relevant sections of the data collected during the study, may be looked at by auditors from and on behalf of the University of Leeds.	
I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the lead researcher should my contact details change during my participation in the project.	

Name of participant	Participant 1
Participant's signature	P. 1.
Date	12/04/2025
Name of lead researcher	Rosie Husson
Signature	R. HUSSON
Date*	12/04/2025

*To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant.

Project title	Document type	Version #	Date
Breaking the Silence: How Digital Media Shapes Women's Emotional Responses to Sexual Harassment Through #MeToo Activism	Consent Form	1	12/04/25

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/ pre-written script/ information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be kept with the study's main documents which must be kept in a secure online UoL sever location or as detailed in the approved Participant Information Sheet.

Secretariat, Research Ethics, Version 1.3, September 2024

9.6 Appendix F: Focus Group Discussion Guide

Focus Group Discussion Guide: Digital Activism and the #MeToo Campaign

Research focus: Understanding how digital activism, particularly the #MeToo campaign, shapes undergraduate women's emotional engagement and offline behaviours.

Introduction

Leader: Thanks everyone for joining this focus group today. To remind you quickly, this discussion is part of my dissertation on how digital activism, such as the #MeToo campaign, affects how women engage with social issues. Everything you say will be anonymised and confidential. Please feel free to speak openly and bounce off each other responding to one another. I also would like to reiterate that within this zoom call, there is no judgement whatsoever, it is just a casual conversation. First, if you all want to introduce yourselves, and say your most used social media platform (ICE BREAKER).

Q1: How often do you see digital activism on social media?

Prompts: frequency, types of activism, algorithm influence

Q2: Do you feel pressured to engage with activist posts online?

Prompts: social expectations, judgement, any emotions related

Q3: What emotions do you tend to feel when you see posts about harassment or campaigns like #MeToo?

Q4: Do you engage and speak about these posts offline?

Prompts: who with?

Q5: Why do you think different individuals engage differently with digital activism?

Q6: Have you ever changed your offline behaviour as a result?

Q7: Do you think movements like #MeToo create real change?

Prompts: awareness and action, societal/structural impact

Closing statement - Has this conversation changed how you view digital activism?

Closing

Leader: Thank you for all your honesty and your responses. You have provided great insights, which are so valuable for my research project, so thank you. If any of you want to withdraw your responses anytime between now and the 25th of April, please feel free to email me. Your responses will be anonymised and confidential in line with the University of Leeds ethical guidelines. Thank you for your participation.

9.7 Appendix G: Focus Group Transcript

Participants:

- Leader
- P1
- P2
- P3
- P4
- P5
- P6

* Names in [] are pseudo names, they are not names of the individuals within the focus group.

Leader: Thanks everyone for joining this focus group today. To remind you quickly, this discussion is part of my dissertation on how digital activism, such as the #MeToo campaign, affects how women engage with social issues. Everything you say will be anonymised and confidential. Please feel free to speak openly and bounce off each other responding to one another. I also would like to reiterate that within this zoom call, there is no judgement whatsoever, it is just a casual conversation. First, if you all want to introduce yourselves, and say your most used social media platform.

P1: I'm [Maya]. Definitely Instagram, and TikTok when I'm unwinding before bed.

P2: I'm [Liv]. I'd agree with [Maya], but TikTok is creeping up there for me.

P3: My name is [Beth]. I use TikTok the most often, but I don't post on there.

P4: [Zara]. Mostly TikTok, I find it interesting how videos circulate on there.

P5: I am [Tia]. I use Instagram but I am really careful with what I share. I'm more of a silent watcher.

P6: I'm [Amara]. TikTok mostly, but I rarely engage publicly.

Leader: Thank you. So, to kickstart the conversation, how often would you all say you come across digital activism on your feeds?

P1: Honestly, every day. My algorithm is full of it. Feminism stuff, Palestine, I feel like its constant.

P2: Same here, it comes in waves though, depending on what's going on in the world.

P3: I see it, but kinda just scroll past. Not always in the mood for heavy stuff. Sorry if that was inconsiderate.

P4: I get that too, but sometimes I think people posting it seems a bit performative. Like people just posting or interacting to say, 'Look! I care too!'

P5: That's true to be fair. I've unfollowed influencers who did the bare minimum during #MeToo and then went silent. I thought it was a bit shitty from them.

P6: I don't really engage with posts. I watch it, read it and keep it to myself. Does that even count?

P2: Of course it does. Not everyone has to be part of the conversation, sometimes it is just about acknowledging it.

P4: I think that also depends on your position on social media. Some people have more freedom to speak up, and more reach.

Leader: That is really interesting. Do you ever feel pressured to engage or share posts?

P5: Yeah definitely. Especially when everyone is posting and you're just like silent. Like in the Black Lives Matter blackout day.

P2: I feel that. There's that unspoken expectation sometimes, like silence equals complicity.

P6: I feel judged if I don't repost, but I also feel like a fake if I do just because everyone else is.

P4: It's a tightrope. You're damned if you do, and damned if you don't.

Leader: Thank you. Anything else to add? No? Okay. I'm intrigued at what emotions come up for you when you see posts about things like harassment or #MeToo? Would anyone care to elaborate on this?

P5: I get overwhelmed. Some stories are really triggering.

P2: Yeh, its confronting. But sometimes I think in a way that is necessary. It made me realise how many people have similar experiences.

P3: Sometimes it makes me feel helpless. Like, I want to do something but don't know what.

P1: I feel empowered when I see people speaking out. It gives me hope, but I completely understand the feelings of hopelessness. I suppose it is a harsh topic.

P6: I feel a mix, I guess. Inspired but also scared. I've never shared anything personal, and don't think I could. So many people follow me on socials that I am only acquaintances with, so I don't want them to know my whole personal life.

P4: The emotional toll is real, but that discomfort is part of the point, no?

P5: Yeah, but I still think boundaries need to be set. We can't constantly absorb trauma all day online.

P2: Agreed. I had to mute hashtags sometimes to get a break. I know that may be horrible to say but I thought I'd be honest.

P1: I get you, but I feel guilt when I take breaks. Like I'm not doing enough.

P4: I think that guilt is built into social media activism. Like, it thrives off urgency.

P3: people then start judging others based on how much they post. It can get toxic pretty quick

Leader: Do you talk about these posts offline?

P6: Not really, I tend to process things alone

P2: I talk to close friends sometimes but not everyone wants to engage with these topics

P5: I bring it up with my sister a lot. It helps having someone to talk to.

P1: I've had whole group chats just debating stuff. Sometimes it gets heated. I suppose that shows passion towards it.

P4: Yeah, it can spark real conversations but only with people who are open to it.

Leader: Why do you think people engage at different levels?

P3: I guess it could depend on personality. I am not outspoken online or offline, so do not put myself out there with that sort of thing.

P1: For me, it is personal. I went through something, so I felt the need to speak out.

P5: Same, but also there's fear, of being judged or traumatised

P6: Not everyone has the same privilege, some people face backlash just for speaking up.

P4: Plus, there's burnout. Activism fatigue is real. We can't all be keyboard warriors 24/7.

P6: Yeah, that is so true. It's actually hard to keep contributing and getting nothing in return in terms of change

P2: Yeah, like, I care but I pick my moments. You can't pour from an empty cup.

Leader: Going back to talking about the posts offline, do you think you have ever changed your offline behaviour as a result of digital activism and #MeToo?

P1: Yeah definitely. I think I'm way more conscious of how I speak about certain topics with friends, especially with guys, I'll call stuff out more than I used to.

P3: I wouldn't say I call things out, but I've definitely changed how I behave in public. Like, I'm more alert when walking home or out at night. Stuff I've seen through #MeToo really stuck with me.

P2: I used to laugh stuff off, like certain comments or jokes but now I tend to actually challenge it. I think seeing women speak up made me realise i shouldn't stay quiet just to keep the peace.

P6: I relate to that. One thing I do now, since all this, I carry my keys differently. I've shared safety apps with friends. It may sound small, but I never would've thought to do that before seeing stories online.

P4: I think it also made me think about how I treat others, especially in work environments. Like being aware of boundaries, consent, not just in a romantic sense but in general interactions

P5: I've actually distanced myself from people. There were some friends who would always joke about these issues, and I just don't have the patience for that anymore. I think I owe that to the movement, it made me draw clearer lines.

Leader: So, you'd say the movement hasn't just changed and influenced how you engage offline, but how you exist offline too?

P2: Yeah, it changed how I carry myself.

Leader: Thank you. Your responses are so insightful. Do you agree that activism like #MeToo even creates real change?

P1: One hundred percent. It gave me the courage to share, and it held people accountable too.

P4: it created awareness, but sometimes I worry it stops there. I mean, obviously it has helped in some cases, but not always

P6: I think it depends on to be honest. Some real changes have happened within big companies, but I fear that felt a bit like a trend

P3: i remember people posting #MeToo and then... nothing. No conversations really followed, from my experience.

P2: But awareness is a key step, no? We can't fix what we don't talk about

P4: yes exactly, it shifted the culture. Even if change is slow, the conversation has started

P1: and more protection for people who speak up. There's still so much fear bundled up

Leader: Thank you for your honesty. What about influencers and brands? Do you trust them when they engage in digital activism?

P3: Honestly no. feels like a PR stunt most times

P5: same

P2: Some do genuinely care though, you can usually tell

P6: I follow more activists than influencers now. They're more consistent

P4: the line between brand and activist is so blurry these days. It is hard to know what's real

P1: that's why personal stories matter, they cut through all that noise

Leader: Has this conversation changed how you viewed digital activism?

P3: yeah, i realise now that small engagements matter too

P4: it's made me think more about how i consume this stuff

P6: I feel less guilt about being a quiet supporter, this is making me realise that what i am doing is enough

P1: I also feel reassured that it is okay to have boundaries too, i don't need to constantly be consuming this but support from afar

P2: same, we all engage so differently and that is fine

P5: I think I'll be more mindful now. Maybe even share a bit more but I don't want to come across as superficial

Leader: Thank you all for your honesty and your responses. You have been so open and provided me with great insights, which are incredibly valuable. If any of you want to

withdraw your responses at any time between now and the 25th of April, please feel free to email me, I have put my email in the chat. Once again, your responses will all be anonymised, and confidential, in line with the University of Leeds ethical guidelines. Again, thank you for your participation. Feel free to leave the call when you are ready.