

***Challenging the Social Order of a Patriarchy Through Social Media Activism:
The Case of the Greek #MeToo Movement***

Tatiana Harkiolakis, The London School of Economics and Political Science, United Kingdom

The European Conference on Arts & Humanities 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Greece's traditionally patriarchal society was shaken by the emergence of the Greek #MeToo movement in 2021, enabled by social media's speed and networked power. However, two and a half years since the movement's emergence on Greek social media and mainstream news media, its legacy and long-term impact on Greek society are still being questioned. Although much research has examined the global #MeToo movement as an instance of feminist social media activism with international dimensions, research on the Greek #MeToo movement is still emerging. This paper aims to fill this gap by examining the Greek #MeToo movement as a feminist social media activist movement that momentarily challenged the social order of Greek society by extending Thompson's (1995) theorizing on the mass media's potential to alter the social order and Papacharissi's (2011) concept of "private sphere" activism on social media. During the Greek #MeToo movement, social media allowed public figures and ordinary citizens to make disclosures of sexual harassment and assault and form networks of solidarity around heavily publicized cases of sexual violence, bypassing the mainstream Greek news media that has traditionally not taken a social justice stance on these cases. However, feminist social media activism also involves the risks of igniting misogynistic backlash and reinforcing existing societal polarization. Although social media activism may potentially push forward news discourses in society, a more systemic approach is needed to spur change in other institutions of society, such as law and education.

Keywords: Social Order, Patriarchy, Social Media Activism, Case Study, #MeToo, #MeToo Greece

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

The first two weeks in October 2022 were marked by an explosion of news articles, commentary, and social media posts commemorating the fifth anniversary of the birth of the #MeToo movement. This hashtag feminist activist movement began in 2017, when American actor Alyssa Milano asked users on Twitter to tweet the phrase “Me Too” if they had ever experienced sexual assault or harassment (Rottenberg, 2019), although black activist Tarana Burke first used the phrase in 2006 (Prata, 2021). As the years went on, the #MeToo movement spread across many countries, adapting to specific women’s concerns in specific national and cultural contexts (Ghadery, 2019). However, coverage of the movement’s fifth anniversary failed to mention the most recent incarnation of the global #MeToo movement: the Greek #MeToo movement, which began in Greece in January 2021.

In this essay, I will argue that new media technologies can alter the social order by demonstrating how the rise of the Greek #MeToo movement on social media altered the social order of Greek society. Through the lens of Thompson’s (1995) theorizing on how mass media alters the social order of society and Papacharissi’s (2010) concept of social media as facilitating a “private sphere” of activism and engagement, I will show that social media allowed for the growth of a movement that would have otherwise been suppressed in Greek society. New media technologies allowed Greek citizens to hold power to account through commentary and media creation on various platforms, bypassing the mainstream media as sole gatekeepers and meaning-makers of society.

Theoretical Framework

Thompson’s (1995) analysis of the role of mass media in changing the social order responded to Habermas’s (1989) critique of the mass media as degrading the quality of the public sphere by drawing people into private, isolated spaces such as homes. Habermas (1989) traced the origins of the public sphere to the rise of the printing press, which gave citizens access to ideas and information to debate and discuss face-to-face. Thompson (1995) contends instead that mass communication technologies allow individuals to transcend the traditional temporal and spatial boundaries of face-to-face interactions. In this manner, individuals can create new kinds of relationships and reorder social organization, allowing individuals dispersed across space and time to see and respond to events in distant locations, a form of interaction that Thompson (1995, p. 100) termed “action at a distance.”

The kind of mediated action that Thompson (1995) described is difficult to monitor and control by external forces, primarily due to the proliferation of means of producing and transmitting media messages. This power is multiplied by the self-referentiality of the media, as media stories or trends in one medium are picked up and reported on by others. The rise of this level of mediated action changed the nature of visibility and its relationship to power, changing the nature of the public-private dichotomy and the resulting social order (Thompson, 1995). This wider range of visibility can expose hidden or secret activities of these public figures, such as scandals, which transgress social norms and expectations and lead to public outcry and denouncement. This exposure process can hold power to greater accountability (Thompson, 1995).

Building on Habermas’s (1989) and Thompson’s (1995) work, Papacharissi (2010) conceived that social media further extend the potential of mediated action for impacting the social order. Papacharissi (2010) proposed the concept of the “private sphere”, a hybrid public-

private space in which citizens enter the “public” space of the internet and social media platforms while residing in private spaces such as homes. Citizens turn to this “private sphere” to make their private agendas and concerns public, dissatisfied with how mainstream institutions, including the mass media and political actors, have prioritized specific public issues while excluding others. In this new form of activism, citizens often participate in networked, transnational movements, actions pluralizing the voices and media available in the public sphere (Papacharissi, 2010).

Chronology of the Greek #MeToo Movement

Greece’s #MeToo movement began in January 2021, when the country was experiencing lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In an obscure online conference Sofia Bekatorou, a national Olympics sailing champion, shared that she was sexually assaulted by a senior member of the Hellenic Sailing Federation after the 2000 Sydney Olympics (Kallergis, 2021). In the coming days, other former athletes from the Greek athletic field came forward, such as water polo champion Mania Bikof and sailing champion Marina Psychogyiou. The accusations spread to the theatre world, where Greek actors and actresses came forward with claims of sexual harassment and assault (*#MeToo*, n.d.).

Among the most notable case was that of Dimitris Lignadis, who was arrested after accusations of sexual assault were made against him, the complainants saying they were minors at the time (“Greece #Metoo,” 2021). In some cases, social media was used to make the original claims, such as when Greek actresses Jenny Botsi, Angeliki Lambri, and Loukia Michala accused the actor and director Kostas Spyropoulos of sexual harassment via a joint Facebook post, while others made their claims in mainstream media such as television shows (Fragkou, 2022; Kokkinidis, 2021). Other cases involved students making claims of harassment against university professors (*#MeToo*, n.d.).

Within days of Bekatorou’s announcement and the cases that followed, a national conversation rapidly spread across social media audiences in Greece about women’s experiences of systemic sexual harassment and rape culture across every facet of society (*#MeToo*, n.d.). For the first time in Greece, hashtag activism kept #ΜετηΣοφια (“With Sofia”) and #eimasteoloimazi (“We are all together”) as trending topics on Twitter (Emmanouilidou, 2021; “Είμαστε όλοι μαζί,” 2021). For Greece, this was the first time a digital feminist movement ignited a national to include voices across social classes and political party lines, from marginalized women to the Prime Minister addressing the long-silence topic of systemic sexual assault and rape culture in the workplace (Emmanouilidou, 2021; Protothema, 2021).

The Greek #MeToo Movement and the Disruption of the Social Order

The spread and development of the Greek #MeToo movement reflect how new media technologies can change the social order. Firstly, social media and its interaction with the mainstream media allowed these topics to gain a level of visibility not previously imaginable in the pre-digital era, as Thompson (1995) noted of the heightened visibility of television media. Bekatorou’s initial revelations were made in an online conference during COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, which would not have been possible without new media technologies. Hers and future statements from athletes and actors were widely circulated on social media, creating a network that allowed individuals in disparate locations to read, watch, write about,

and comment on the events, allowing for Thompson's notion of "action at a distance" (Thompson, 1995, p. 100).

These statements could bypass the mainstream media altogether, which was initially lacking in support for Bekatorou and other victims, evinced when some journalists and public figures appeared to sympathize with the perpetrators or blame the victims of these cases (Διοτίμα, 2022; Κωνσταντίνου, 2021; *Πως αντιδρά η Τατιάνα Στεφανίδου*, 2021). In pre-digital times, the mainstream media's doubtful stance may have stopped the Greek #MeToo movement from emerging as such. Social media thus upended the traditional social order in which mainstream media would have been gatekeepers of such information. Furthermore, the heightened visibility of social media held power to account. It exposed the secret activities of public figures, as Thompson (1995) noted of television, with some sexual harassment accusations made directly through social media, with social media users even widely criticizing the doubtful stance of mainstream media figures. Thompson's self-referentiality of the media was also evident, with mainstream media reporting on the trending nature of Greek #MeToo on social media and social media users commenting on events reported in the mainstream media (Δημητριάδη, 2022).

The social media aspect of the Greek #MeToo movement also exhibited aspects of Papacharissi's "private sphere". When COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns prevented people from engaging and interacting in the physical public sphere, social media platforms served instead as a way to access the public sphere while residing in private spaces. Citizens used social media to speak about sexual harassment and assault, topics that were long ignored or derided by the mainstream media agenda (Δημητριάδη, 2022; Κωνσταντίνου, 2021). The Greek #MeToo movement thus became an extension of the networked, transnational #MeToo movement, a growth that would not have been possible without new media technologies' creation, distribution, and networking potential.

Conclusion

The Greek #MeToo movement represented a profound change in a society where systemic workplace sexual harassment and assault were issues that were never granted relevance in the mainstream public sphere. By forming a social media movement that interacted with mainstream media to hold power to account and generate a new "private sphere", ordinary citizens challenged the hierarchies of power in Greek society in a way not previously possible in the pre-digital age. However, while legal reforms and other social changes are still playing out in Greece (Κουναλάκη, n.d.; *Πού εξαφανίστηκε το ελληνικό metoo;*, n.d.), what remains to this day the movement's legacy is how it sparked a conversation and wave of awareness-raising around sexual harassment and assault, breaking the long-held silence of a collectivistic, patriarchal society.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr. Myria Georgiou for her comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

References

- Clark-Parsons, R. (2019). "I see you, I believe you, I stand with you": # MeToo and the performance of networked feminist visibility. *Feminist Media Studies*, 1–19.
- Emmanouilidou, L. (2021, February 11). *Greece 'finally' has its #MeToo moment*. The World from PRX. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2021-02-11/greece-finally-has-its-metoo-moment>
- Fragkou, M. (2022). "No one will ever be alone again": Performances of Precarity and Solidarity amid the Greek #MeToo. *Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna*, 167, 6–32. <https://doi.org/10.34762/gzzg-jd55>
- Ghadery, F. (2019). # Metoo—Has the 'sisterhood' finally become global or just another product of neoliberal feminism? *Transnational Legal Theory*, 10(2), 252–274.
- Greece #Metoo: Prominent actor Dimitris Lignadis held over rape accusations. (2021, February 20). *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56140274>
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The public sphere: An inquiry into a category of Bourgeois society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Kallergis, K. (2021, January 20). Greece #Metoo: Women ending silence of sport abuse shake Greece. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55716338>
- Kavoura, A. (2022). From silence to speaking up about sexual violence in Greece: Olympic journeys in a culture that neglects safety. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13.
- Kokkinidis, T. (2021, January 29). #MeToo Movement in Greece Spreads from Sport to Entertainment. *GreekReporter.Com*. <https://greekreporter.com/2021/01/29/metoo-movement-in-greece-spreads-from-sport-to-entertainment/>
- #MeToo: #MeToo Greece: Women ending silence of sexual abuse. (n.d.). Retrieved October 26, 2022, from <https://www.freiheit.org/greece/metoo-greece-women-ending-silence-sexual-abuse>
- Metoo: Πρωτοβουλία κατά των γυναικοκτονιών από 22 γυναικείες οργανώσεις*. (2022, February 13). Newsbeast. <https://www.newsbeast.gr/greece/arthro/8303062/metoo-protovoulia-kata-ton-gynaikoktonion-apo-22-gynaikeies-organoseis>
- The #MeToo Movement and the Greek Silence. (2018, May 29). *Greece@LSE*. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/greeceatlse/2018/05/29/the-metoo-movement-and-the-greek-silence/>
- Papacharissi, Z. (2010). *A private sphere: Democracy in a digital age*. Polity.
- Prata, A. (2021). Caught in the wave: Sexual harassment, sexual violence, and the #MeToo movement in Portugal. *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning*, 1, Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.7146/kkf.v29i2.124895>

- Rottenberg, C. (2019). # MeToo and the prospects of political change. *Soundings*, 71(71), 40–49.
- Smith, H. (2021, December 21). Calls for femicide to become separate crime in Greece mount as two more women killed. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/dec/21/greece-femicide-crime-two-more-women-killed>
- Thompson, J. B. (1995). *The media and modernity: A social theory of the media*. Stanford University Press.
- Δημητριάδη, Φ. (2022, January 17). Θα σώσουν τελικά τα social media το ελληνικό #metoo; Oneofus.gr. <https://www.oneofus.gr/life/kosmos/tha-sosoun-telika-ta-social-media-to-elliniko-metoo/>
- Διοτίμα. (2022, April 7). Εισήγηση | Τι μας δίδαξε το ελληνικό #metoo; Διοτίμα.
<https://diotima.org.gr/eisigisi-ti-mas-didaxe-to-elliniko-metoo/>
- Είμαστε όλοι μαζί: Αυτό είναι το ελληνικό #Metoo - Τσουνάμι συμπαράστασης στα social media [We're all together: This is the Greek #Metoo - Tsunami of support on social media]. (2021, February 2). *ProtoThema*.
<https://www.protothema.gr/greece/article/1090879/eimaste-oloi-mazi-auto-einai-to-elliniko-metoo-tsunami-subarastasis-sta-social-media/>
- Κουναλάκη, Ξ. (n.d.). *Απέτυχε το #MeToo στην Ελλάδα*; Retrieved October 26, 2022, from <https://www.kathimerini.gr/opinion/561362056/apetyche-to-metoo-stin-ellada/>
- Κωνσταντίνου, Α. (2021). *Κίνημα #MeToo: Αναπαράσταση των γυναικών στα ελληνικά Μέσα Μαζικής Ενημέρωσης*. <https://apothesis.eap.gr/handle/repo/51113>
- Πού εξαφανίστηκε το ελληνικό metoo; (n.d.). AthensVoice. Retrieved October 26, 2022, from <https://www.athensvoice.gr/epikairotita/politiki-oikonomia/706433/poy-exafanistike-elliniko-metoo/>
- Πως αντιδρά η Τατιάνα Στεφανίδου. (2021, March 2). in.gr.
<https://www.in.gr/2021/03/02/greece/tatiana-stefanidou-ekpompis-tis/>