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### ► To cite this version:

Alexandra Masciantonio, Sandy Schumann, David Bourguignon. Sexual and gender-based violence: to tweet or not to tweet?. 2020. hal-02502330v1

**HAL Id: hal-02502330**

**<https://hal.univ-lorraine.fr/hal-02502330v1>**

Preprint submitted on 9 Mar 2020 (v1), last revised 30 Aug 2021 (v2)

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Running Head: Tweeting about sexual and gender-based violence

Sexual and gender-based violence: to tweet or not to tweet?

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This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**ABSTRACT**

This exploratory study aims to identify reasons that lead victims of sexual and gender-based violence to share, or, not share their experiences on Twitter. Open-ended survey responses of 94 victims of sexual and gender-based violence were analyzed using the ALCESTE method, a qualitative and inductive approach. Results showed that those who shared their experience on Twitter did so to render sexual and gender-based violence more visible and to support other victims; they declared that they also wanted to change society, contributing in this way to a wider collective movement. On the contrary, participants who did not tweet their experience reported concerns about different costs and risks, such as feeling ashamed, the fear of being judged and blamed by others and even a lack of trust in the Twitter platform and its members. Focusing on the implications of rape culture in society, this study concludes with a call for a framework integrating models of self-disclosure and collective action to conceptualise the testimonials of sexual and gender-based violence on social media.

*Keywords: Twitter, sexual and gender-based violence, MeToo movement, self-disclosure, collective action, social media.*

## **1. Introduction**

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is a form of “violence that is targeted at women or men because of their sex and/or their socially constructed gender roles” (Carpenter, 2006, p. 83). Following the Harvey Weinstein affair in October 2017, actress Alyssa Milano encouraged people all over the world to testify on social media their experiences of SGBV, using the #MeToo hashtag (Saltiel, 2018)<sup>1</sup>. Initiated on Twitter, the movement spread rapidly to other platforms including Facebook, Snapchat and Reddit (Garcia, 2018; Manikonda, Beigi, Liu, & Kambhampati, 2018). Since then, victims have continued to publish their stories, with or without reference to #MeToo (Stenberg, 2018). However, previous research has shown that most of the victims of sexual abuse do not reveal what they have experienced to others (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990). The same goes for incidents of sexism, as women do not dare to respond to the gender-based remarks they are confronted with in public (Swim & Hyers, 1999). Two questions emerge from this observation: why do some victims decide to testify on social media? And, why do others not take the leap?

To address these research questions, we conducted a qualitative online survey study, focusing on reports of SGBV on the micro-blogging platform Twitter. Victims of SGBV provided in free-text answers their reasons for sharing experiences of SGBV as well as reasons for deciding to keep this information to themselves. Answers were analysed with the ALCESTE method, and the interpretation of themes drew on two lines of literature. First, we considered reporting of SGBV on Twitter as a form of online self-disclosure, which speaks to an interpersonal point of view. Second, applying an intergroup perspective, we took into account that sharing experiences of violence may constitute an expression of online collective action.

### *1.1 Interpersonal perspective: reporting SGBV as online self-disclosure*

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<sup>1</sup> The term MeToo was first proposed by Tarana Burke to help the victims of sexual aggression and harassment. The #MeToo movement was widely criticized for its contribution to the invisibility of black women (Onwuachi-Willig, 2018).

Self-disclosure corresponds to “what individuals voluntarily and intentionally reveal about themselves to others – including thoughts, feelings and experiences” (Posey, Lowry, Roberts, & Ellis, 2010, p. 183). Decisions to self-disclose a stigmatized identity<sup>2</sup> are informed by the goals that victims seek to attain, such as developing a sense of self, understanding the situation better, being able to have hope once more or building intimacy (Ahrens, Campbell, Ternier-Thames, Wasco, & Sefl, 2007; Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). More generally speaking, negative events are shared for the purposes of catharsis and comprehension but also to obtain support and social connections (Delfosse, Nils, Lasserre, & Rimé, 2004). Emotional experiences that are kept secret are associated with stronger feelings of shame and guilt (Finkenauer & Rimé, 1998). In other words, whether individuals disclose their experiences to others depends on the assessment of its costs and benefits (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). For example, remaining silent when faced with sexism could be explained by examining appraisals of the costs and benefits of the confrontation (Kaiser & Miller, 2004). Victims may not testify because they are afraid of being judged negatively by others and of a backlash from the aggressor. At the same time, reporting victimization also shows the perpetrator that their behavior is unacceptable.

In the case of computer-mediated communication (CMC), studies concentrated on disclosure of daily events (Joinson & Paine, 2007). A burgeoning body of research demonstrates that CMC offers affection and intimacy as much as, or more, than Face to Face (F2F) communication (for a review, see Walther, Van Der Heide, Ramirez, Burgoon, & Peña, 2015). For example, Posey et al. (2010) highlighted the costs and benefits related to self-disclosure on social media (i.e., Facebook and Myspace). Users appeared to be looking first and foremost for reciprocity: by revealing themselves to others, they expect them to do the same. Disclosure was also enhanced by users’ high trust in the online community and low

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<sup>2</sup> Stigmatized identity refers to “personal information that is socially devalued but is not readily apparent to others, such as mental illness, experiences of abuse or assault, or an HIV-positive diagnosis” (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010, p. 236).

perceived risks of breaches of data confidentiality. However, there is a paucity of research on self-disclosure of SGBV on social media. Andalibi, Haimson, De Choudhury, and Forte (2016) filled some of the gap and emphasized the importance of anonymity in the disclosure of sexual abuse experiences on the Reddit platform. Being anonymous encouraged victims to disclose themselves to others because it protected them from the potentially negative consequences of public exposure; it appeared that social support could be obtained more easily that way.

Taken together, we propose that testimonies about SGBV on social media can be conceptualized as a form of self-disclosure, implying that the reasons for reporting experiences may be to seek social support, to develop a sense of self, to strength the relationship with one's online community or to show the perpetrator that their behavior is unacceptable.

### *1.2 Intergroup perspective: reporting SGBV as online collective action*

In addition to viewing the posting a testimony of SGBV on social media as self-disclosure, we argue that it may also be considered as a form of collective action in the sense that individuals act “as a representative of the group and the action is directed at improving the condition of the entire group” (Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990, p. 995). Previous research documented that social media use can facilitate political and civic activism offline (Boulianne, 2009; 2015) by providing information and opportunities to create networks and interact with likeminded individuals (e.g., Alberici & Milesi, 2013; Nah, Veenstra, & Shah, 2006; Theocharis, Lowe, Van Deth, & García-Albacete, 2015; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Social media platforms further enable the extension of collective action repertoires, that is, collective action can also be taken online. Providing a framework to structure these activities, Van Laer and Van Aelst (2010) distinguished internet-facilitated and internet-based action as well as high- and low-threshold action. Sharing private experiences of violence with a global audience may be viewed as an internet-based action, which could not be taken without relying on online platforms and is the result of “the internet's *creative function*” (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010, p. 1148).

Participation in collective action is also facilitated by individuals' identification with the group on whose behalf they act, the level of perceived injustice, and how efficacious they believe to be in attaining collective goals (Van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). That is, testimonies of SGBV on social media - if conceptualised as collective action - may be the result of strong identification with the group of victims of SGBV, perceiving victims as having been treated unjustly, and considering their expression of experiences of victimization online as an efficient way to promote social change.

The Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) further noted that online interactions between individuals who think of themselves as members of the same social elicit an immersion in the group and depersonalization effects, expressed by an enhanced salience of group membership and compliance with situational group norms (i.e., cognitive component; Lea & Spears, 1991; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998). In other words, engaging with testimonials of SGBV of others on Twitter can contribute to a stronger sense of belonging to the group of victims of SGBV. Importantly, group memberships that are more salient elicit behavior that aims to consolidate and mobilize these social identities (Spears, 2017); it is also referred to as "performing identity" (i.e., strategic component; Klein, Spears, & Reicher, 2007). Identity consolidation consists of asserting and celebrating the social identity of the group and also confirms one's identity as a group member. Identity mobilization, which is central to the study of collective action, aims at improving the position of the ingroup in society by mobilizing the in-group and attempting to convince the outgroup to support their cause. Here, the outgroup encompasses people who deny and minimize SGBV in society; including perpetrators, family, friends, colleagues but also media, politicians or the police. Combining insights on predictors of collective action and the SIDE model, testimonies of victimization on social media can then be understood as a means for presenting oneself as a victim, promoting the rights of victims of SGBV, mobilizing support from fellow victims as well as society as a whole, and, ultimately, achieving social change.

### *1.3 The current study*

The present study aims to identify both the reasons that lead victims of SGBV to testify their experiences on social media as well as reasons that prevent individuals from doing so. We focus specifically on the micro-blogging site Twitter. Besides the fact that it was the incubator of the #MeToo movement, Twitter is one of the most used social media platforms in the world ('Top Social Network Websites in the world', 2020). It has been widely studied for its role in facilitating online self-disclosure (Keller, Mendes, & Ringrose, 2018; Manikonda, Meduri, & Kambhampati, 2016) and collective action (Lotan, Graeff, Ananny, Gaffney, & Pearce, 2011; Theocharis et al., 2015). Our study was conducted in France where less than 3% of victims dare to make a complaint about SGBV (Bousquet, Vouillot, Collet, & Oderda, 2019). The #MeToo movement began in France shortly after the call of Alyssa Milano. A New-York based French journalist, named Sandra Muller, invited French people to be part of the movement with the hashtag #BalanceTonPorc (that is to say, #DenounceYourPig) and to share the names of their perpetrators (Ronadio, 2017). Criticism was raised immediately; a few months after, 100 influential French women signed an open-letter to contest the movement (Collective, 2018). In September 2019, Sandra Muller was convicted for defamation, highlighting the complex situation of reporting SGBV in France (Tenaglia, 2019).

This study takes an exploratory approach and relies on qualitative data from a unique sample of victims of SGBV. We draw on two explanatory perspectives to interpret the data. First, testimonies of SGBV on social media may be conceptualized as self-disclosure online. Second, these testimonies could constitute individual contributions to a larger collective movement against SGBV in our societies. In support of the interpersonal perspective, we could expect that participants testify on Twitter to find social support, achieve catharsis or build connections (Delfosse et al., 2004). Conversely, those who do not report SGBV on Twitter would be expected to refer to a lack of anonymity, to the feeling of shame or a certain distrust of the Twitter community (Andalibi, 2016; Finkenauer & Rimé, 1998; Posey et al., 2010). On



the other hand, if the intergroup perspective dominates, participants who report on Twitter could evoke the importance of their group identity and the efficacy of this type of collective action. Those not reporting on Twitter would rather be inclined to consider this type of action as ineffective to fight SGBV and conclude that the costs are far higher than the benefits (Brunsting & Postmes, 2002; Van Zomeren, Leach, & Spears, 2012).

## **2. Method**

### *2.1 Sample*

Ninety-four people who self-reported being victims of SGBV agreed to take part in this study (88 women, 4 men and 2 people who have a gender identity other than male or female). The unequal gender distribution may reflect men's difficulty to recognize and accept the sexual abuses they have experienced, particularly due to a number of sociocultural factors<sup>3</sup> (Alaggia, 2005; Romano & De Luca, 2001; Sorsoli, Kia-Keating, & Grossman, 2008). The participants age ranged between 18 and 62 ( $M = 28.23$ ,  $SD = 9.11$ ). As to their life situation, 40 participants were student, 38 had a professional activity, 8 were unemployed and 8 were in another situation. Eight participants had filed claims for acts of SGBV to the court. Two sub-samples were created based on whether the victims had shared their experience of SGBV on Twitter or not (Table 1).

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<sup>3</sup> Men and persons with another gender identity were kept in the analyses, even in a small number, to actually make it possible to detect differences in their discourses.

Table 1. Distribution of the two sub-samples according to gender, life situation, age, the filing of the complaint to the court and the use of hashtags.

		<b>Sub-sample: report on Twitter</b>	<b>Sub-sample: no report on Twitter</b>
<b>Gender</b>	<i>Woman</i>	27	61
	<i>Man</i>	1	3
	<i>Other identity</i>	1	1
<b>Life situation</b>	<i>Students</i>	6	34
	<i>Workers</i>	15	23
	<i>Unemployed</i>	4	4
	<i>Other situation</i>	4	4
<b>Age</b>	18 - 52 ( <i>M</i> = 31.79, <i>SD</i> = 8.79)	18 - 62 ( <i>M</i> = 26.65, <i>SD</i> = 8.86)	
<b>Complaint filed to the court</b>		5	3
<b>#MeToo or #BalanceTonPorc used</b>		15	

## 2.2 Procedure

This study is part of wider research project on the predictors of reporting incidents of discrimination on Twitter. Participation was voluntary and all participants signed an informed consent form. An anonymous online questionnaire was created using the LimeSurvey software; the questionnaire was available in French. The hypertext link, which enabled the participants to access this questionnaire, was tweeted via one of the researchers' Twitter accounts. This procedure has already been used in other studies (Chen, 2011; Johnson & Yang, 2009). The use of a non-probabilistic sampling method is justified in this qualitative research because it aims at refining and exploring, rather than testing, theories (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Data collection was carried out from 6th January 2019 to 11th February 2019.

## 2.3 Measures

We verified with two questions whether participants had indeed a Twitter account and had been a victim of SGBV. Participants also estimated the time that had passed since this event (less than 3 months, from 3 to 6 months, from 6 months to 1 year, from 1 to 2 years, from 2 to 5 years, from 5 to 10 years, more than 10 years). The participants then had to specify whether they had reported this violence on Twitter, and if this was the case, if they had used the #MeToo hashtag or its French version, #BalanceTonPorc. Lastly, when the participants declared that they had made a report on Twitter, they were encouraged to answer the open question: “Why did you decide to share on Twitter the gender-based and sexual violence you experienced?”. If they answered that they had not reported their experience on Twitter, then the following question was asked: “Why did you not want to share on Twitter the gender-based and sexual violence you experienced?”. Doing so, two corpuses of answers were obtained which were subject of two separate analyses that applied the ALCESTE method.

#### 2.4 *ALCESTE method*

The ALCESTE method was created by Max Reinert (1983, 1986, 1987); it uses a top-down hierarchical classification technique to classify and interpret qualitative text data. This approach is inductive (Klein & Licata, 2003). Words that are used together, and which therefore refer to a same context, are clustered into distinct homogeneous classes. Each word is assigned a chi-square value indicating its association with the class to which it belongs. Doing so, the procedure makes it possible to highlight the internal structure of a corpus of text, which is referred to as lexical universes.

The analyses were conducted with the IraMuTeQ software (Ratinaud, 2009). This software uses lemmatization: full words, that is, nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, are reduced under their root forms (i.e. "eat", "ate" and "eaten" are gathered into their infinitive root form "to eat"). Moreover, the analysis requires data cleaning and formatting (Broc & Caumeil, 2018). Spelling mistakes were corrected first. Then “dashes” were added between the words “social” and “media”, and between the words “real” and “life”; so that the software could

process them as a sole unit. Finally, so-called starred variables were associated with each open answer. These starred variables are not part of the text but offer additional information (Marpsat, 2010): they referred to participants' gender, the time that had passed since the victimization, whether respondents had filed a complaint to the court and, lastly, the use of the #MeToo or #BalanceTonPorc hashtags.

### **3. Results and discussion**

#### *3.1 Tweeting about sexual and gender-based violence*

Due to the fact that only 29 of 94 respondents had reported experiences of SGBV on Twitter, the corpus of answers of this sub-group was small for the analysis. Based on recommendations from Reinert (2002), we duplicated the corpus: all words can therefore be analyzed at least twice. The final corpus consisted of 2442 occurrences (i.e., the total number of full words) and contained 394 reduced forms. A simple top-down hierarchical classification on text was carried out, and 68.97% of answers to the question "Why did you decide to report the gender-based and sexual violence you experienced on Twitter?" were classified. More precisely, six classes were extracted: the first encompassed 15% of these answers, the second 15%, the third 15%, the fourth 20%, the fifth 15% and the sixth 20%.

##### *3.1.1 First class (15% of answers): talk about sexual and gender-based violence at work*

The significant<sup>4</sup> presences of reduced forms in this class are: research (25.19), environment (25.19), report (14.78), want (9.61), work (4.27), follow (4.27), support (4.27), anger (4.27); the starred variable refers to the time passed since the event of SGBV was also significant, for this class between 3 to 6 months (11.93). The lexical universe conveyed the need to report SGBV that takes place in the professional environment. The discourse dealt with the impunity of aggressors at work, aggressors whose responsibility is often removed and

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<sup>4</sup> The chi-square values are in brackets.

violence made invisible. The following are characteristic segments<sup>5</sup>: “During a discussion on **work** conditions and how those who inflict and those who experience are treated I **wanted** to **report** this injustice and I launched into it without thinking, it was to **report** the fact that aggressors in the **work environment** are easily **supported**” (sum of the chi-squares of the included reduced forms = 58.12) or “a solely verbal violence with no great consequences but in a professional context to testify to the triviality of sexism and the social stigma of obesity in the **research community**” (sum of the chi-squares = 50.38).

*3.1.2 Second class (15% of answers): give visibility to sexual and gender based violence*

The significant presences are as follows: show (16.47), people (14.78), find (9.61), feel (4.27), take (4.27), testimony (4.27), follow (4.27), necessary (4.27), number (4.27) and the starred variable indicates that the SGBV had occurred between 5 and 10 years ago (11.93). The discourse highlighted the importance of giving visibility to SGBV. The victims aimed to raise awareness for the scope and ubiquity of this type of violence. A few characteristic segments are: “because a lot of **people** did it I felt it was legitimate to talk about what happened to me and I **found** that it was **necessary** to add my **testimony** to the others to **show** the **number** and frequency of this violence” (sum of the chi-squares = 57.94) and “to **show** that it happens to everyone doesn't just happen to others and to **raise the awareness** of the **people** who follow me that it is a current situation and that it can happen to anybody and sometimes to **people** close to you without you knowing it **show people** the situations that we find abnormal” (sum of the chi-squares = 49.40).

*3.1.3 Third class (15% of answers): contribute to #MeToo movement*

The significant presences are the following: balancetonporc (25.19), situation (14.78), metoo (14.78), want (9.61), feel (4.27), support (4.27), number (4.27), appear (4.27) and the

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<sup>5</sup> Characteristic segments are segments of discourse with the highest sum of chi-squares of the included reduced forms for the class; due to lemmatization, there is no punctuation.

starred variable referred to the use of the hashtags #MeToo or #BalanceTonPorc (5.78). The lexical universe conveys the influence of the #MeToo movement on victims; it gave them courage to share their story, which they did using the #MeToo or #BalanceTonPorc hashtags. Victims sought to make a contribution to the movement and wanted to support and encourage other victims. A few characteristic segments: “when **metoo** and **balancetonporc** appeared I **supported** on twitter people who had the same fear and **situation** as mine people who had hesitated to testify because there is much worse that was what triggered it for me I also had to testify and add my even insignificant strength to this **number** and fight against my feeling of being illegitimate” (sum of the chi-squares = 67.56) or “because I **felt** driven by **metoo** and **balancetonporc** I **wanted** to show the other potential victims that they are not alone ” (sum of the chi-squares = 53.85).

#### *3.1.4 Fourth class (20% of answers): overcome the feeling of shame*

The significant presences are: use (17.78), sexual (9.61), shame (9.61) and the starred variable made reference to how much time had passed since the victimization, here, less than 3 months (8.42). The lexical universe documents the difficulty of overcoming feelings of shame and guilt associated with the experience of SGBV. Some victims managed to share their story with the help of alcohol. Others highlighted the importance of not feeling ashamed and on the contrary, tried to hold the aggressors accountable for their acts. Some characteristic segments: “I **used** the **whyididn’report**<sup>6</sup> a few months ago actually if I'm being honest I'd had too much to drink that evening and I no longer had any of the filters that I had had since the time of the offence and which prevented me from **talking** about the **shame** the position of empowerment of the aggressor (sum of the chi-squares = 33.53) and “I am the vice\_chairman of an association for the victims of traumatic amnesia related to sexual **violence** experienced in childhood we **encourage** the victims to **talk** so that the **shame** naturally changes sides I had to do the same

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<sup>6</sup> In September 2018, following words from Donald Trump, the #WhyIDidntReport hashtag allowed a large number of victims to explain on Twitter why they had not filed claims for the sexual aggressions they had experienced (Fortin, 2018).

myself especially we are also fighting to get the law changed and when we intervene in the national assembly or the senate we also come with our stories so mine is public to **help** our cause” (sum of the chi-squares = 31.19). This class, as well as class 6, represents the highest percentage of classified text.

*3.1.5 Fifth class (15% of answers): file a complaint*

The significant presences are: share (25.19), file (15.19), condemn (25.19), victim (16.47), rapist (14.78), rape (14.78), justice (14.78), story (14.78), need (14.78), work (4.27), management (4.27), so (4.27), send (4.27), encourage (4.27), appear (4.27) and the starred variables denoted the fact that victims had filed a complaint to the court (28.24) and used the #MeToo or #BalanceTonPorc hashtags (5.78). The discourse of this class reflects filing a complaint for acts of SGBV, and the majority of participants whose answers were represented in this class were people who have filed a complaint to the court. The victims expressed that they experienced difficulties associated with convicting the aggressor and the mismanagement of victims in the current justice system. A few characteristic segments: “to **share** what I experienced to **encourage** other **victims** to break the silence to also show that the aggressor doctor is free despite the two legal proceedings and the Medical Association and yes when you are the **victim** of a doctor there are two procedures and show that **filing** a complaint it not enough to send the aggressor to jail ah if only it was the case there is very little **justice** in France 2 of the **rapists** are **convicted** and also to **share** the reality of the **management** of the **victims** in my case a judicial and therapeutical catastrophe and the **need** to evacuate it” (sum of the chi-squares = 149.19) and “because metoo **appeared** a few weeks after the end of my court case against my trial against my **rapist** he was **sentenced** to a suspended sentence listing on the register of sexual delinquents damages without mentioning the details of the sordid complicated exhausting affair which lasted for 10 years even though he had partly confessed in short I **needed** to **share** my story and its conclusion the continuity of my reconstruction **work** and I

could at last say that I was a **rape victim** I survived and my rapist has been recognized as such” (sum of the chi-squares = 134.51).

### *3.1.6 Sixth class (20% of answers): change the mentalities*

The significant presences in this final class are: see (28.24), change (18.91), file (17.78), sort (17.78), society (17.78), reason (17.78), end (17.78), try (17.78), complain (9.61), thing (9.61) and the starred variables were reporting having a gender identity other than female or male (8.42) and between 1 month and 1 year having passed since the event (8.42). The lexical universe points to the will to help move things forward, to change the perception and the treatment of SGBV in society. Respondents wanted to put an end to the impunity of aggressors and to do this, they tried to encourage other victims to speak out about what they have experienced. A few characteristic segments: “for the pure and simple **reason** that I have never been ashamed of having been raped that I **filed a complaint** and **sent** the rapists to jail that I assume **talking** about it without mentioning any names justice is done that **society** must end this denial and that we must help it to **finish** that this is what the **testimonies** are for from my point of **view** so that ours can **give** the victims the courage and strength **necessary** to **file a complaint** it's **so** important if we want **things** to **change**” (sum of the chi-squares = 156.13) and “because we have to **talk** about it to **try** to change mentalities roughly I **see** women being harassed and men with fragile egos not seeing the problem **society** as a whole must **change** and I hope that if we report every day the **aggressions** we experience daily men will **end** up understanding and **changing**” (sum of the chi-squares = 106.63).

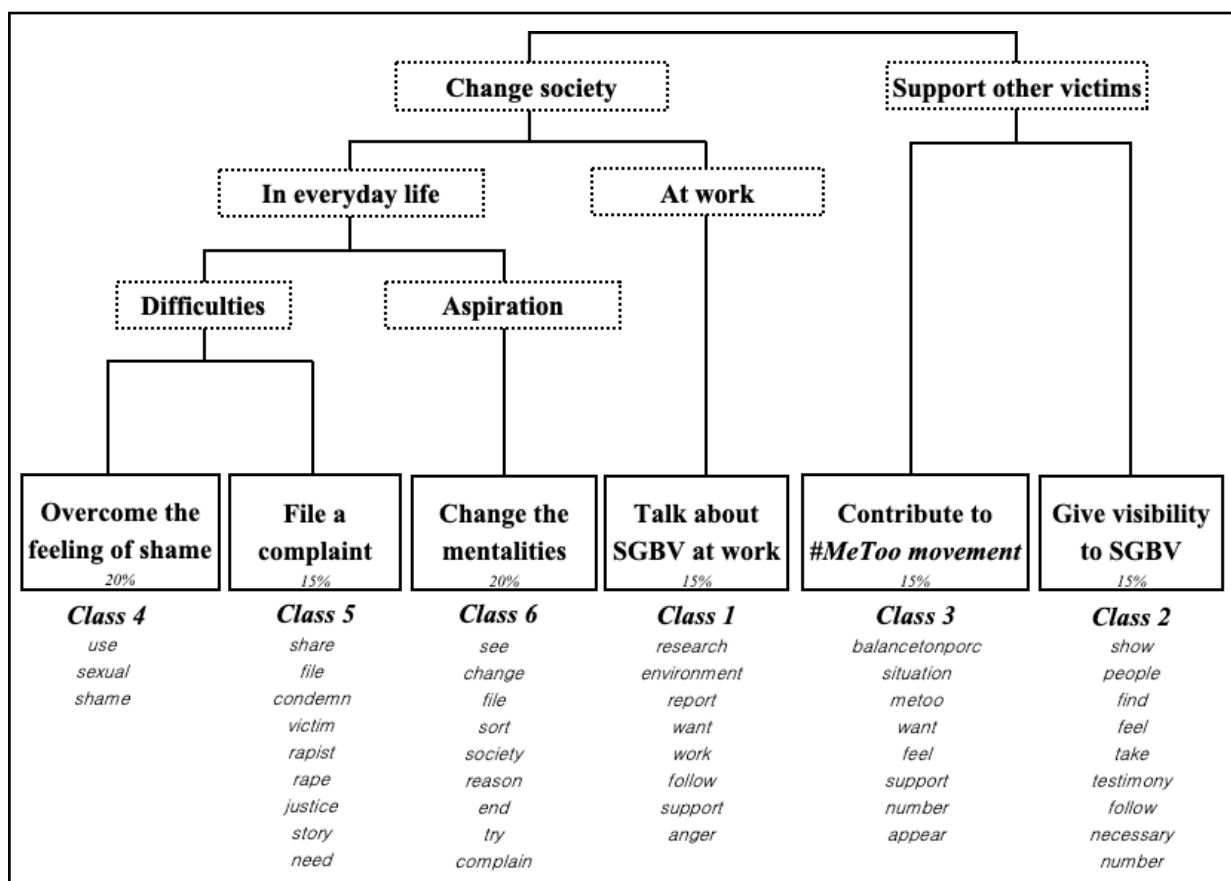
### *3.1.7 Graphical representation and discussion*

Taken together, the findings suggest that the participants testified on Twitter both to support other victims but also to bring about a change in society (Figure 1). They were above all trying to give visibility to SGBV (class 2) and show that it is a societal problem that can affect everybody. The #MeToo movement appears to have strongly contributed to this trend (class 3). It enabled a large number of victims to realize that they are not alone and, thus, can



support each other. Secondly, the victims wanted to contribute to a considerable societal change, whether at a personal or a professional level. The victims reported SGBV they had experienced in their workplace, driven by a feeling of anger and powerlessness (class 1). In addition, they also made reference to the obstacles that had to be overcome when facing violence on a day-to-day basis, such as the difficulty of filing a complaint (class 5). The current judicial system, indeed, is struggling to convict aggressors and the management of victims is very often deplorable (Renard, 2018). Moreover, participants spoke about the feeling of shame that prevents them from sharing their story (class 4). Other analyses dealing with SGBV highlight the prevalence of the feeling of shame (Alaggia, 2005). Importantly, the victims tried to make a difference through their testimony (class 6); they wanted to change opinions about and perceptions of SGBV in societies. The discourses of this latter class were predominantly expressed by people with an identity other than female or male, suggesting that the fights against sexism, racism and LGBTQ-phobia are often interlinked (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010).

Figure 1. Dendrogram of the top-down hierarchical classification on the reasons for having reported sexual and gender-based violence on Twitter.



In other words, our analyses showed that the participants sought to attain in-group benefits; they neither spoke of the need for understanding and catharsis, nor of the wish to regain hope (Ahrens et al., 2007; Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010; Delfosse et al., 2004). On the contrary, participants sought social connection, wanted to fight sexism and educated others (Ahrens et al., 2007; Andalibi et al., 2016; Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010; Delfosse et al., 2004; Kaiser & Miller, 2004). It therefore seems valid to consider sharing experiences of SGBV on Twitter as a form of internet-based collective action. As highlighted by the strategic dimension of the SIDE model that seems to expression here via its two functions (Klein et al., 2007), Firstly, participants are able to consolidate and confirm their membership in a group of victims: they give their group and common fight visibility. Secondly, participants can mobilise support for the in-group by trying to change the perception and the treatment of SGBV. The discourse thus shows that it is by mobilizing both the out-group and the in-group that real improvements can emerge.

### *3.2 Not tweeting about sexual and gender-based violence*

The corpus of answers by participants who did not tweet about their experiences was composed of 2299 occurrences and contained 631 forms. A simple text top-down hierarchical classification was carried out; 63.08% of answers to the question “Why did you not want to testify on Twitter to the sexual violence you experienced?” were classified. Five classes were identified: the first includes 19.51 % of these answers, the second 17.07%, the third 24.39%, the fourth 14.63 % and, lastly, the fifth 24.39%.

#### *3.2.1 First class (19.51% of answers): distrust of followers*

The significant presences are as follows: know (19.49), real\_life (14.49), followers (11.70), personal (8.69), see (8.69), want (6.44), current (5.94) and story (4.58). This lexical universe speaks to participants’ cautiousness with regards to telling their *followers* a personal story. Followers are considered as strangers not to be trusted. A few characteristic segments: “some of my **followers know** me in **real\_life** and do not **know** I do not **want to tell** them in

this way moreover for me this is rather private and I do not want to **share** it with strangers to **see** my **story** taken apart and judged whether positively or negatively no-one has the right to judge it and writing it makes **people** think they have the right to do it” (sum of the chi-squares = 73.95) and “too **personal** and I have very little interaction with **followers** that I do not **know** at all in **real\_life**” (sum of the chi-squares = 54.37).

### *3.2.2 Second class (17.07% of answers): Twitter rejection*

The significant answers are as follows: talk (21.08), twitter (10.79) and need (5.62). This discourse emphasizes that Twitter is quite simply not a suitable place to talk about private events. The participants prefer to talk to friends and relatives about the SGBV they have experienced. A few characteristic segments: “it wasn't serious enough for me to mention it and I feel that if I **need** help on this, there are better places than **twitter** to **talk** about it” (sum of the chi-squares = 38.21) and “I think that **twitter** is the worst place to **talk** about one's **life**” (sum of the chi-squares = 35.52).

### *3.2.3 Third class (24.39% of answers): time to move on*

The significant presences are: violence (21.79), friend (10.03), metoo (10.03), mutual (10.03), leave (9.55) and time (6.16). The starred variable specifying the time passed since the event, for this class between 5 and 10 years (2.51), was present but not significant. This variable may nevertheless help to understand the discourse better. The discourse bears on SGBV that the participants consider to be in the past. They indicated that they had put it behind them, that they do not want to talk about it again for the time being. Several reasons are then given, such as, the fact that participants and the aggressor have mutual friends and also that they have managed to rebuild their life following the victimization. The discourse also reflects a set of considerations about the #MeToo movement. The movement actually enabled certain victims to understand what they had experienced better. A few characteristic segments: “because I was not on **twitter** at the **time** I reported it to the appropriate person obstetrical **violence** reported to the management of the maternity ward less **informed** of these issues at the **time** I underwent

psychotherapy to leave it all behind me so I didn't feel the need” (sum of the chi-squares = 44.30) and “it's thanks to the **metoo** craze that I realized that I had been the victim of **sexual violence** it took me time to realize” (sum of the chi-squares = 34.96). Regarding the percentage of text classified and represented by this class, this discourse as well as class 5 are the largest.

#### *3.2.4 Fourth class (14.63% of answers): fear of backlash*

The significant presences are: afraid (26.55), aggressor (25.86) and people (4.44). This lexical universe revolves around a fear of backlash. The victims are afraid of being judged by others or that the aggressor might try to get revenge or harm their reputation. Characteristic segments: “I didn't do it because I don't have many followers so there would have been no impact moreover there are followers who know me and my **aggressor** I know that if I had told the **facts** they would have guessed who my **aggressor** was and would have been surprized he is popular and does not correspond to the caricature that **people** have of a rapist so I was **afraid** that some people would not believe me which would have been painful and that they would think that I was trying to slander the person and lastly I could have been reduced to the status of **victim** or liar by a lot of **people** and I don't want these impacts on my life” (sum of the chi-squares = 62.71) and “afraid of my words being turned against me by my **aggressor** she is lying she is mad she wants revenge **afraid** of the harassment which could follow” (sum of the chi-squares = 52.41).

#### *3.2.5 Fifth class (24.39% of answers): sense of shame*

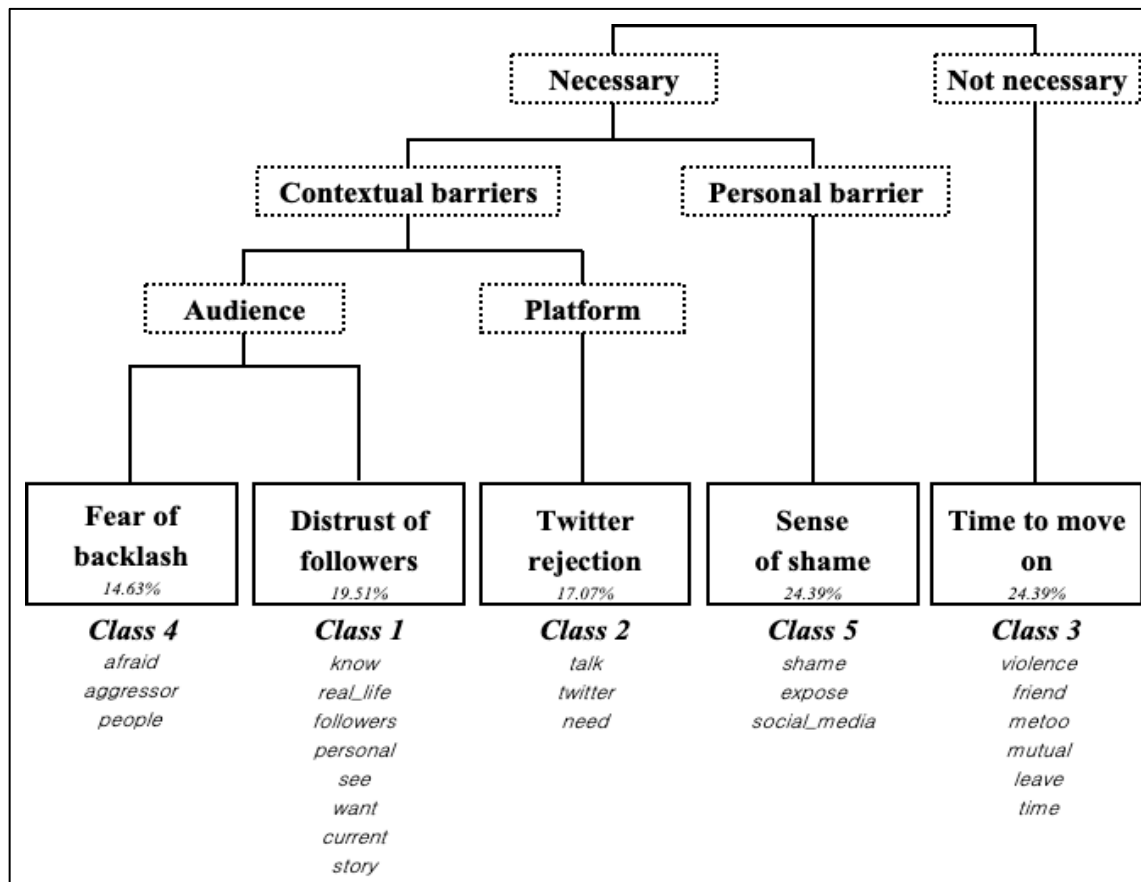
The significant presences are: shame (17.65), expose (9.55), social\_media (6.07) and the starred variable refers to the time that has passed since the event, i.e. for this class between 3 and 6 months (3.92). This lexical universe conveys the victims feel ashamed. Participants did not wish to talk about the victimization on social media so as not to expose it publicly. The SGBV had been experienced recently; for most it dated back to less than 6 months. A few characteristic segments are: “**shame** guilt don't want to **expose** my life” (sum of the chi-squares = 27.20), “I didn't have twitter at the time and through **shame** I don't want to **expose** the events”

(sum of the chi-squares = 27.20) and “too personal feeling of **shame** and it was a long time ago it's more important for me to be there for new victims” (sum of the chi-squares = 17.65). Regarding the percentage of texts classified, this discourse and that of class 3 are the most prevalent.

### *3.2.6 Graphical representation and discussion*

The lexical analysis highlights different motivations for not reporting SGBV on Twitter (Figure 2). Some participants did not want to express what they had experienced, neither in online nor offline contexts (class 3). However, even when the victims felt the need to testify, they were faced with a set of costs linked to the disclosure on Twitter. The context of the testimony - the platform - constitutes a first obstacle. On the one hand, the Twitter platform was not perceived as a place for talking about intimate and private events (class 2). On the other hand, participants were wary of their followers: they are strangers and are therefore unpredictable (class 1). In addition, victims were afraid of the possible backlash resulting from such a report (class 4). They might for example find themselves criticized and judged by others, and the aggressor might seek revenge. In addition, the victims were also halted by their own emotions. They felt strongly ashamed, which prevented them from revealing their experiences (class 5).

Figure 2. Dendrogram of the top-down hierarchical classification on the reasons for not having reported sexual and gender-based violence on Twitter.



In other words, and consistent with the literature, the hierarchical classification demonstrates a set of costs related to self-disclosure, such as the lack of confidence in the online community, the fear of interpersonal costs and the feeling of shame (Kaiser & Miller, 2004; Posey et al., 2010; Rimé, 2009). Moreover, analysis of the starred variables suggests an influence of time that had passed since the victimization: the more recent the event, the more it was associated with shame (class 5). Conversely, as more time had passed, victims reported having gradually rebuilt their life (class 3). These results further indicate that analyses of any online behavior, including the testimonies studied here, must take into account the characteristics and features of the respective platform, in this case Twitter. Previous research has supported the argument that social network sites cannot be considered as a homogeneous media; they differ in their digital architecture (Bossetta, 2018) and their implicit norms of expression (Waterloo, Baumgartner, Peter, & Valkenburg, 2018). In the case of Twitter,

Johnson and Yang (2009) showed, for example, that the platform is mainly used to satisfy informational and not social needs. This could partly explain the fact that some victims refused to talk about intimate and painful events on Twitter: it does not seem to be the right place.

#### **4. General discussion**

##### *4.1 Contribution*

This study explored the motivations of victims of SGBV to testify, or not, on Twitter. Findings highlight that participants reported experiences of SGBV to support other victims by making their group more visible and to contribute to wider societal change (Klein et al., 2007; Spears, 2017). Participants, however, also perceived a set of risks that lead them to not post their testimonial on Twitter; victims reported feelings of shame, the fear of being judged and blamed by others, distrust of the Twitter community and fear of backlash from the aggressor (Finkenauer & Rimé, 1998; Kaiser & Miller, 2004; Posey et al., 2010).

Based on these results, we propose that in order to understand the drivers of testimonies of SGBV on Twitter, interpersonal and intergroup dynamics must be considered. On the one hand, motivations for not reporting experiences of SGBV on Twitter resonate with the literature on self-disclosure and established concerns that prevent individuals from sharing intimate and painful experiences. On the other hand, reporting personal experiences of violence may be best understood as a form of collective action that is thought to enhance the success of a collective movement. Thus, by giving personal stories visibility on social media, what may at first sight not appear as *collective* but individual action (Wright et al., 1990), victims strive to attain goals for their ingroup. It goes beyond the scope of this study to evaluate whether the intended societal change and group goals can or have indeed been achieved. However, it is evident that victims informed outgroup members about the injustice that their group lived through; the posts can also facilitate conversations on Twitter between victims and outgroup members - both means to promote solidarity-based action (Boulianne, 2015; Reimer et al., 2017).

The study further highlighted that platform characteristics as well as – or, rather, in interaction with – individuals' needs and motivations shape users' behavior. Notably, participants' discourse points out that the lack of anonymity on Twitter can increase the perceived costs of sharing testimonials of violence. Andalibi et al. (2016) demonstrated that users seized anonymity as a means for protecting themselves from public exposure and therefore obtained more easily social support on the Reddit platform. At the same time, by not being anonymous users can expose their personal stories in a powerful way, and, in doing so, act collectively on Twitter. Thus, when victims are less concerned about repercussions, a lack of anonymity on a platform like Twitter may be seen as an opportunity and not a limitation: the victims are ready to face the opinion of others in order to reach a common aim. Results resonate with the concept of cyberfeminism, a form of activism that use features of CMC, like enhanced visibility, to facilitate the collective fight (Clark-Parsons, 2019).

The comparison of the two corpuses of answers – those that indicate why victims of SGBV may share their experiences or refrain from doing so – also provides evidence for what is known as rape culture. As Eric Fassin stresses in an interview, this term consists of “thinking of sexual violence in cultural and not individual terms, [...] like a practice entered into the norm which makes it possible because it tolerates it, and even encourages it” (Leprince, 2017). The myths about rape encourage victim blaming, i.e. the fact of “making a victim bear the responsibility of what they incur” (Rey-Robert, 2019, p. 36; Russell & Hand, 2017). Our analyses show that the victims did not want to testify on Twitter because they were ashamed, blaming themselves in part for what has happened to them. Conversely, victims who have testified on Twitter were aware that they should not be ashamed. Concluding, this study also documents the consequences of rape culture, i.e. a strong sense of accountability of the victims, and also a change in these beliefs and a wish to break away from victim blaming.

#### 4.2 *Limitations and future research*



These conclusions must be viewed in light of the following limitations. First, we are unable to generalize the results to other platforms. The strong rejection that participants expressed regarding the use of the Twitter platform may have affected the results. Future research should increase measures of preferences and attitudes towards different social network sites. Moreover, the size of the corpus of answers is limited, specifically in the first corpus. Future research should therefore obtain larger samples in order to refine these results. Second, the participants are all French, and there are cultural differences not only in the use of social media (Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011) but also in norms and prevalence of SGBV between countries (Burt, 1980) that we can not account for. Lastly, this qualitative study provides an exploratory insight into the testimonies of private and painful events on social network sites; future studies should therefore use quantitative approach to complete and to extend these results.

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