

Has #MeToo Movement Actually Helped Prevent Sexual Harassment, Assault?

Millions of Americans have searched Google for information on how to understand, prevent and report sexual harassment and assault since the start of the #MeToo movement more than a year ago, a U.S. study suggests.

In October 2017, following public accusations of sexual harassment and assault against film producer Harvey Weinstein, actress Alyssa Milano encouraged victims to bring the taboo topic out of the shadows by sharing their own stories on social media. The resulting #MeToo movement resulted in widespread sharing on social media, and the new study, published in JAMA Internal Medicine, offers fresh evidence that the movement has contributed to a shift in public thinking about these issues, said senior author John Ayers of the University of California, San Diego.

"#MeToo is not the first movement to empower victims of sexual violence, but what is unique compared to past movements is #MeToo's staying power," Ayers said by email.

For the study, researchers monitored the volume of Google searches originating in the U.S. from January 1, 2010 through June 15, 2018 related to sexual harassment and assault.

During the last eight months of the study period – after #MeToo began – there were 40 to 54 million Google searches related to sexual harassment or assault, the greatest number of searches on this topic ever recorded in the U.S., the study found.

Overall volume for this topic was 86 percent higher during these eight months than what researchers calculated would have

occurred in the absence of #MeToo based on their analysis of the earlier years of the study.

Searches related specifically to reporting sexual harassment and assault were 30 percent higher than expected over the last eight months of the study.

And searches related to preventive training for sexual harassment and assault were 51 percent higher than expected.

These results suggest that #MeToo may have reduced the stigma of reporting or discussing sexual harassment and assault, the authors conclude.

Google searches may also help connect victims with needed support and health resources, Ayers said.

“Survivors face serious health consequences including physical injury, PTSD symptoms, and emotional trauma,” Ayers said. “Yet, public investments in preventing and responding to sexual violence is disproportionately small compared with other health issues.”

However, the authors note, online activity is only a proxy for public engagement with topics like sexual harassment and assault, and more research is needed to determine whether or how the surge in Google activity might relate to meaningful shifts in public opinion or behavior.

It’s also unclear whether surges in search activity related to sexual harassment and assault were sustained only by the #MeToo movement on social media or related also to media coverage of accusations against high-profile men across a wide range of industries, said Luis Rocha, a researcher at the School of Informatics & Computing at Indiana University in Bloomington.

“This is all new territory and only time will tell with future studies,” Rocha, who wasn’t involved in the study, said by

email.

“I would think that what people do online will lead to greater awareness that can in turn lead to changes in workplace environments,” Rocha added. “If people are searching online in great volumes for the topic, it means they are interested (even if pinged by the media) in the topic, so I would expect this to have very real impact in all aspects of their lives.”
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