



Full length article

Exploring rape culture in social media forums



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ABSTRACT

Current research has yet to examine the phenomenon of rape culture, particularly within social media forums. The present study investigated the attitudes about rape, rapists, and gender-based violence within the comments section of newspaper articles reporting about rape and sexual assault. Naturalistic observation was used in order to gather statements within the comment sections following newspaper articles posted on either the periodical website or the periodical's Facebook page. Four themes and various sub-themes emerged from the data. The major themes include, Victim Blaming and Questioning, Survivor Support, Perpetrator Support, and Trolling Statements about Law and Society. Notable findings were found in the amount of victim blaming statements made in the comments responding to articles (25.8 percent) and perpetrator support comments were found responding to every article collected, except for one. The authors discuss the implications of rape culture within and outside social media and suggest future research to be conducted to further understand the impacts of rape culture within the online sphere.

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1. Introduction

Digital media consumption in contemporary society has become a standard of how many people acquire their news and viewpoints on cultural issues. For instance, the American Press Institute survey found that 69 percent of respondents accessed news information from their laptops and computers within the last week (American Press Institute, 2014). Recently, the Media Insight Project surveyed 1046 Millennials and found that 85 percent polled say, "keeping up with the news is somewhat important" and 69 percent of these individuals read news daily (Media Insight Project, 2015). Most interesting, 86 percent of Millennials report seeing "diverse" opinions in social media on news topics and 40 percent of them pay for a news-specific service, application, or digital subscription (Media Insight Project, 2015). The digital communication through websites and news reports being posted by individuals on those websites contributes to an intersection of cultural discourse about news related events. Thus, leading some sociologists to name the phenomenon as the "digitalization of everyday life" (Lövhheim, Jansson, Paasonen, Sumiala, & Teologiska, 2013). This digitalization of everyday life both obscures and reminds us of that fact that

identity, agency, and power cannot be attributed to the individual or the machine alone: rather they are the outcome of interactions and negotiations within a network of actors (p.26).

Social science researchers and feminist research have both started to focus on how women, people of color, and sexual identities take shape through words on a webpage. For instance, a recent study by Moss-Racusin, Molenda, and Cramer (2015) analyzed over 831 online comments responding to journalistic articles discussing scientific evidence of gender bias in STEM fields, most notably amongst STEM faculty members. Using thematic analyses, researchers found that although most comments acknowledged that a gender bias exists and some even called for social change, there was still a sizable amount of denial and justifications of gender bias.

Stavrositu and Kim (2015) examined how blogs and the resulting comments sections influence opinions and intentions of the writers making the comments. It was found that user-generated comments could interfere with the message given by the blog itself. Interestingly, when commenters shared optimistic narratives, it could influence the person reading the comment to agree with them. Conversely, if the person commented pessimistically about a risk (in this study, the risk was skin cancer), the responder would not see themselves exposed to the same risk, but rather different from the other commenter.

Similarly, pessimistic discourse in a comment thread has also shown to shape public commentary on social media. Anderson,

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Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, and Ladwig (2014) found that both positive and negative discourse can be helpful in shaping and molding public opinion, however the amount of negative discourse can also have a negative impact on healthy dialogue. They state:

Much in the same way that watching uncivil politicians argue on television causes polarization among individuals, impolite and incensed blog comments can polarize online users based on value predispositions utilized as heuristics when processing the blog's information (Anderson et al., 2014, p. 383).

This article will study the digital discourse of rape culture within comments threads that follow a sexual assault news story. The cultural phenomenon of 'rape culture' has been defined by Herman (1984) to be created in society because "it fosters and encourages rape by teaching males and females that it is natural and normal for sexual relations to involve aggressive behavior on the part of males" (p. 52). Recently, *Time* contributor Zerlina Maxwell described rape culture as "a culture in which sexual violence is the norm and victims are blamed for their own assaults" (Maxwell, 2014). Furthermore, Suran (2014) declared that rape culture was no longer a subculture of feminism, but a systematic and collective problem. Suran asserts that rape culture shows that the "cultural or societal explanation of rape [has] moved causation from a micro to a macro level" and is due to "the prevailing heterosexual power hierarchy to which we have all been inured" (2014, p. 277–8).

Grubb and Turner (2012) reviewed rape myths, gender roles, and substance-use on victim blaming. In this analysis, men demonstrated a higher rape myth acceptance than women, a finding also supported by Suarez and Gadalla (2010). Furthermore, men also blame women more often than women blame women for an alleged rape. Of particular relevance to the present study, Grubb and Turner (2012) discovered that the literature states that women who consume alcohol prior to being raped had higher rates of victim blaming by both sexes, as compared to women who were assaulted while sober.

Most recently, Boux and Daum (2015) examined how technology and social media is used in the investigation of rape and sexual assaults when perpetrators and their peers document the incident. The researchers asserted that technology creates new avenues for victim blaming in regard to rape cases and society, overall. Consequently, it was found that social media challenges, as well as reinforces, rape culture within society by adding rape myth commentary to the discussion. The present researchers seek to expand on this innovative research by exploring rape culture within social media.

Moreover, the present researchers are interested in exploring how social media comment threads following newspaper articles shape discourse on attitudes and viewpoints about rape and sexual assault. Specifically, if rape cultural beliefs are observed to be a part of comment threads. As the incidence of sexual assault rises among men and women in the United States, and the media reports on it, the researchers seek to explore how viewpoints on the crime of sexual assault are discussed in social media comment threads. That is, is there a discourse of rape culture within the thread of comments under newspaper articles reporting about rape?

2. Methods

2.1. Publications

The researchers reviewed newspaper periodicals in order to assess for evidence of rape culture. According to documentation by the Alliance for Audited Media (2013), the researchers gathered the top four newspapers in the United States, as determined by average

circulation of the top twenty-five U.S. newspapers. This list included digital editions, comprising of those accessible on computers, smartphones, tablets, restricted websites, as well as branded applications.

The periodicals chosen for the present study included, the Wall Street Journal, New York Times, USA Today, and Los Angeles Times. As of 2013, the total average circulation for the periodicals were 2,378,827 for Wall Street Journal, 1,865,318 for New York Times, 1,674,306 for USA Today, and 653,868 for Los Angeles Times. These four periodicals were chosen based on their rank of being the most popular in the United States.

2.2. Comments section

The present study used naturalistic observation of the comments section that followed a newspaper article posted on either the periodical website or the periodical's official Facebook page. The researchers collected the string of comments from each comment thread under an article, de-identified each comment, and uploaded the data into QSR NVivo 10 (2015) Qualitative Analysis Software. The comments were de-identified in order to keep the anonymity of the commenters, as this study did not gather consent from commenters. Due to the anonymous nature of this study, it is probable that one person (commenter) may have posted multiple comments within one comment thread. Thus, the study did not focus on the specific commenters themselves, but rather coded each comment as separate—even if the same commenter generated these comments. Therefore, the units of analysis for this study were comments within the comment thread, not the person making the comment. The researchers determined that by coding comments separately from the commenter, the study would be able to capture the complexities of rape culture.

2.3. Procedure

Data collection was completed between December 2014 and March 2015. To control for subjective selection bias of articles by the researchers—as well as to control for any news-cycle patterns—the researchers established parameters on data collection. Comment threads were collected only from articles that included the words "Rape" or "Sexual Assault" in the newspaper title. Additionally, the researchers alternated the location of where the data was collected, two months from Facebook posts and two months directly from the periodical website. This was an attempt to collect comments from differing audiences. One audience, the population that reads newspaper articles directly from a website and must pay a monthly subscription fee to comment in threads. The second audience, the population that reads and comments on an article as it appears in their Facebook feed and does not pay a fee to provide feedback. This was in order for the analysis to include two possibly different populations. One population that reads a newspaper regularly and has disposable income and time to subscribe to a newspaper website and another population that is more casual in how they consume the news. It is noted that is likely that there may be overlap between these two populations.

The data collection process controlled for researcher selection bias and news media cycle bias by only selecting articles posted in the first seven days of each month—rather than self-selecting articles—to observe rape culture as it occurs in a week's time. The researchers collected the comment threads on average of three days after the article was posted online to allow the dialogue to commence within the comment threads. Therefore, it is possible that more comments were posted after the data was already collected.

In total, the researchers collected 4239 comments between

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