Rape Myths in Digital Spaces: An Analysis of High-Profile

Sexual Assault Cases On Twitter

Word Count = 5,476*

*Excluding References, Appendices, and Figures

Abstract

As demonstrated through the #metoo and Time's up Movements, sexual assault has proven to be an inescapable facet of everyday life. While sexual assault literature has expanded to explore the digitization of sexual violence and rape culture, there has been less attention to how rape myths permeate digital spaces such as Twitter. To explore rape myths in online spaces, this paper analyzes over 10,000 tweets related to high-profile sexual assault cases in order to understand what Twitter users are saying about high-profile cases of sexual violence. Furthermore, these tweets are analyzed to understand their meaning in the context of rape culture. Through a qualitative thematic analysis, I examine the composition of tweets from two separate sexual assault cases: (1) the Steubenville High School rape case (2012) and (2) the Stanford Rape case against Brock Turner (2015). My analysis details how Twitter users discuss sexual violence and highlights how these users mitigate and resist rape culture in a digital world. Specifically, I explore how these tweets reveal both a resistance towards rape myths relevant to the Steubenville and Stanford rape cases and a critique of pertinent institutions that perpetuate rape culture. I argue the patterned nature of users' tweets demonstrate a shared-consciousness amongst digital feminist users that allows for a communitive response in challenging sexual violence. The interlinked nature of these tweets highlight the potential of social networks as a source of feminist solidarity and as a tool to facilitate conversations regarding digital feminist activism. This research aims to advance feminist work on sexual violence by highlighting how beliefs regarding sexual assault are maintained and distributed online.

Keywords: Sexual Violence, Digital Feminist Activism, Rape Myths, Social Media

RAPE MYTHS IN DIGITAL SPACES: AN ANALYSIS OF HIGH-PROFILE SEXUAL ASSAULT CASES ON TWITTER

Over the past decade, social media has evolved to play a significant role in how we make sense of our everyday relationships and experiences. Considering the continuous proliferation of digital technology and the prevalence of sexual violence against women, it is important that researchers confront this intersecting relationships between digital technology, sexual victimization and rape culture. Historically, media such as television or newspapers have played a large role in the construction of rape myths, which are defined as false cultural beliefs about sexual violence, victims, and perpetrators that serve to normalize occurrences of sexual assault (Suarez and Gadalla 2010; Bonnycastle 2012). However, limited literature has explored how rape myths and rape culture are conceived and mitigated on social networks (see Stubbs-Richardson, Rader, and Cosby 2018). As we emerge into an increasingly digitized society, it is of utmost importance that we understand the nuanced intersection between Twitter and sexual violence as to obtain more effective victim advocacy and rape-prevention projects in online spaces.

My approach to exploring the portrayal of sexual violence in digital spaces oriented around two central research questions. First, what are Twitter users saying about sexual violence in relation to high-profile cases of sexual violence? And second, what is the meaning of these tweets in the context of rape culture and rape myths? To measure these areas, I have utilized a qualitative thematic analysis examining tweets from both the 2012 Steubenville High School rape case and the 2015 rape case against Brock Turner (also known as the Stanford rape case). While my original intention was to explore how rape myths were expressed within these cases, instead I found tweets demonstrating digital feminist activism as users resisted rape myths and critiqued institutions perpetuating rape culture. In this way, this essay advances perspectives on the intersection between

sexual violence and social media while also contributing to an understanding of digital feminist advocacy in relation to sexual violence prevention.

As this analysis used findings derived from tweets surrounding the Steubenville and Stanford rape cases, we must first recognise how these cases played out within the criminal justice system and the broader public in order to truly understand the context in which users engaged in these tweets.

Overview of the Steubenville High School Rape Case

On August 11th, 2012, high school students in Steubenville Ohio congregated for an end-of-summer party; however, by the next day, videos and photographs from the party had circulated online revealing that a 16-year-old party attendee (referred to as "Jane Doe") had been sexually assaulted over several hours. Ma'lik Richmond and Trent Mays, two star players from Steubenville High's football team, were arrested and charged with the rape and kidnapping of Jane Doe. Although their charges could have led to more than 25 years in prison, in March 2013, Mays and Richmond received a 2-year and 1-year minimum sentence respectively in juvenile detention. After less than a year, Richmond was released, returning to the Big Red football team the following academic year (Huffington Post 2014). The Steubenville rape case has been recognized as a turning point in rape prevention projects as it brought attention to the pervasive nature of sexual violence on a national level.

Overview of the Stanford Rape Case

The "Stanford Rape Case" refers to the events of January 18th, 2015 when Brock Turner sexually assaulted an unconscious young woman near Stanford University's campus. The victim

(referred to as "Emily Doe"), was a 22-year old women visiting her sister at a nearby California university. Turner, a Stanford University student and member of the school's varsity swim team, was interrupted during the attack by two intervening witnesses who apprehended Turner and called the police. Later that evening, Turner was arrested for two counts of felony sexual assault, two counts of rape (which were dropped by the district attorney prior to trial), and one count of attempted rape. Although these charges held a maximum sentence of fourteen years in prison, Turner's eventual conviction of three counts of felony sexual assault resulted in only six months in prison – a sentence which sparked public indignation towards Santa Clara County Superior Judge Aaron Persky. The case against Brock Turner reinvigorated discussion on campus sexual assault and highlighted the role that privilege plays within cases of sexual violence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sexual Violence and Rape Culture

Both the Steubenville and Stanford rape cases can be viewed in the context of rape culture, a setting in which sexual violence is both normalized and excused. Misogynistic views of women, essentialist conceptualizations of gender, and the frequent subordination of women, function to create myths about rape and sexual violence (Hlavka 2014; Ryan 2011). An adherence to these myths can lead to lowered rates of police reporting, a lack of public support for victims of sexual assault, and an increased risk of sexual victimization (Klement, Sagarin, and Skowronski 2018; McMillan 2018). Existing outside the realm of truth or empirical evidence, these rape myths are maintained through interpersonal relationships, mainstream media, and even through policies within the criminal justice system (Ryan 2011). Common myths orient around the "stranger rape" scenario where rape is between a dark and suspicious stranger and a young, white, and

unsuspecting women. This prototypical situation is considered the benchmark from which to understand instances of sexual violence where deviations such as intoxication, race, or a privileged perpetrator are not considered "real" instances of rape (Bonnycastle 2012). Holding sexual violence to an unsubstantiated standard is emblematic of how rape myths serve to undermine victims and minimize their experience.

Social Media, Sexual Violence, and Digital Feminist Activism

As social media expands its reach, scholars have more recently explored the intersection of rape culture and digital technology. However, there remains a dearth of scholarship regarding how rape myths are replicated in digital spaces (Stubbs-Richardson et al. 2018). Social media has been increasingly utilized as a tool for change, where online users have turned to social media to fight oppression (see Jane 2016; Keller 2012). These users often engaging in a "call-out culture", defined as the public denouncing of perceived racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism (Nakamura 2015). By strategically engaging in this call-out culture, feminist activists can counter online sexism while increasing the visibility of feminist voices (Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller 2018:236). This is especially so as digital mediums welcome a diverse collection of women allowing for an accessible dissemination of information and technology-enabled social engagement (Keller 2012). Within these new online spaces, we can understand digital activism as a new direction in feminist advocacy and a way to leverage core feminist topics such as sexual violence.

In terms of combatting sexual violence, these online spaces can act as a place of support, resistance, and advancement for victims and others affected by this problem (Lokot 2018; Salter 2013). Although there is clear evidence that social media can perpetuate and validate rape culture,

Rentschler (2014) argues that online spaces still provide the opportunity to better understand rape culture, which is necessary if women plan to effectively challenge it. Campaigns such as the #meToo or #BeenRapedNeverReported illustrate the potential for digital feminist activism to create substantial change in the realm of rape prevention work, while also functioning as a tool for fostering a sense of collective solidarity amongst feminists using social media (Mendes et al. 2018). As Sills et al. (2016:937) explained, digital spaces are collaborative networks with the "capacity to construct a collective response to rape culture."

Social media has been equated to fostering a feminist counter-public, a discursive arena in which participants - often members of subordinate social groups – can formulate oppositional interpretations of societal norms. The notion of a feminist counter-public, as initially established by Salter (2013), is important as social media spaces can become a platform for accountability and justice as it has the influence to disrupt traditional power relations. As Dodge (2016:76) elaborates, social media specifically allows for feminists to "craft new narratives about sexual violence and the various stereotypes that perpetuate it". Social media sites provide opportunities for feminist advocates to counter the perpetuation of rape culture while provoking further discussion regarding solutions to tackle these problems (Sills et al., 2016). In the wake of the #meToo movement, opportunities for individuals to participate in digital advocacy are growing fast, thus creating a need to understand how users engage within online spaces, especially when the content is related to sexual violence against women.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Research Question and Data Collection

My approach to exploring the portrayal of sexual violence on social media is through answering two important questions: (1) what are Twitter users saying about sexual violence in

relation to high-profile cases of sexual violence? and (2) what is the meaning of these tweets in the context of rape culture and rape myths? As my aim was to capture public opinion, Twitter was a fitting medium as it allowed me to capture naturalistic dialogue as it mimics a blog-like setting where users willingly discuss their thoughts and offer unsolicited opinions (Murphy 2010). Twitter has been especially fitting since it has recently been recognized as an outlet for digital movements and a space for online acts of resistance (see Mendes et al., 2018).

My data was derived through tweets discussing two high-profile cases of sexual violence -- the Steubenville and Stanford rape cases. I deliberately selected these cases as they shared common elements such as an unconscious victim, intoxication of the perpetrator(s), a connection between school affiliated sports and the attacker(s), and participants under the age of 25 (Levin 2016; Oppel Jr. 2013). Therefore, my data was comparable and I was able to isolate themes and patterns. My dataset was specifically formed through queries within the Twitter Application Programming Interface (API) which was customized to isolate tweets that featured specific keywords (see Table 1). The queries deliberately include multiple date ranges to capture different periods throughout the cases (i.e. arrest or sentencing).

Table 1: Parameters of Search Queries

Query	Case	Date Range	Search Keywords	Total Results
1	Steubenville High School Rape Case	August 2014 – December 2014	("Steubenville") & [("Rape") or ("Rapist") or ("assault")]	3360

2	Steubenville High School Rape Case	December 25 2012 – March 19 2013	("Ma'lik Richmond") & [("Rape") or ("Rapist") or ("assault")]	1466
3	Steubenville High School Rape Case	April 5th 2013 – September 3 2013	("Trent Mays") & [("Rape") or ("Rapist") or ("assault")]	106
Total Tweets regarding Steubenville Rape Case				4932
4	Stanford Rape Case	March 1 2016 – June 1 2016	("Brock Turner")	1215
5	Stanford Rape Case	December 5 2016 – December 21 2016	("Brock Turner")	601
6	Stanford Rape Case	October 26 2016 – December 5 2016	("Brock Turner")	256
7	Stanford Rape Case	June 22 2016 – June 30 2016	("Brock Turner")	2197
Total Tweets regarding Stanford Rape Case				3655

These queries resulted in an initial total sample of 34,100 tweets. Following this, I discarded all retweets and kept only the original tweets for further analysis as this led to a more manageable sample size and allowed me to focus on the content of the tweet opposed to the frequency of retweets. A total of 9201 tweets were remaining in the dataset. To determine relevancy of each tweet and gain a sense of the data, I sorted each tweet into one of three categories: (1) relevant (tweet demonstrated user engagement with one of the two cases); (2) non-relevant

(tweet had no connection to the aforementioned cases); or (3) neutral (tweet had no standpoint or did not engage within the case, i.e. news stories, information-based tweets). Primarily, tweets were excluded because the content was deemed 'neutral' which often meant the tweet was stating facts regarding the case. As we aimed to measure user engagement, the final dataset only included tweets categorized as relevant, which resulted in a dataset of 3447 tweets (see Table 2 for exact distribution of tweets).

Table 2: Tweet Distribution

	Relevant	**Neutral Tweets**	**Non-Relevant**	**Total**
Steubenville	2245	2676	11	4932
Stanford	1902	2260	107	4269
Total	**3447**	**4936**	**118**	**9201**

Qualitative Analysis of Data Collected

I utilized a qualitative approach to analyze each tweet as it allowed me to view how users discussed sexual violence in regards to the Steubenville and Stanford Rape cases. Specifically, I used elements of both thematic and discourse analysis (see Braun and Clark 2006; Moody-Ramirez and Cole 2018) in order to isolate key themes and identify patterns within the data. Through an extensive literature review, I created a coding scheme based on which rape myths were relevant within the context of the Steubenville and Stanford Rape cases. I began with deductive coding according to these categories, however, upon realizing the majority of tweets opposed rape myths, I incorporated inductive analytical methods, creating additional categories to better capture the diversity of the tweets (e.g., a critique of sentencing; resistance of victim blaming). The final coding scheme consisted of 33 predefined categories (see Appendix 1 for category specific

inclusion criteria) where each tweet was codified and categorized, at times being in as many as nine different categories. Within the codified data, I explored the patterns and trends across the dataset through use of mind-maps, tables, and diagrams (see Braun and Clarke 2006). Upon extracting the themes and sub-themes, I conducted my qualitative analysis of this data with the intention of measuring the meaning within these tweets in reference to rape culture and rape myths. The following section will outline selected themes from this data within the context of digital activism and rape culture.

FINDINGS

In my analysis, I identified two key themes: (1) user resistance of rape myths present within the two cases and (2) a critique from users regarding the different facets of rape culture. These findings come together to demonstrate that instead of tweets perpetuating rape culture, users tweeted content that countered misconceptions about sexual violence throughout the Steubenville and Stanford rape cases.

Resistance of Rape Myths

Users discussing the Steubenville and Stanford rape cases countered the rape myths present within the media through deliberate tweets resisting specific rape myths relevant to the rape cases (see Table 4 for resistance to rape myths).

Table 3: Frequency of Resistance to Rape Myths

	Steubenville Rape Case (n = 2245)	% Relevant Steubenville	Stanford Rape Case (n = 1902)	% Relevant Stanford	Total

Resistance – Perpetrator Ideology	57	2.5 %	165	8.7 %	222
Resistance – Rape being minimized	192	8.6 %	210	11.0 %	402
Resistance – Woman Lie about Rape	13	0.6 %	4	0.2 %	17
Resistance – Intoxication as Linked to Rape	8	0.4 %	55	2.9 %	63
Resistance – Men Cannot Control Themselves	9	0.4 %	4	0.2 %	13
Resistance – Victim Blaming	52	2.3 %	36	1.9 %	88
Resistance – Faulty Conception of Consent	24	1.1 %	36	1.9 %	60
Resistance – Allegations Ruin Rapist Life	91	4.0 %	24	1.3 %	115
Resistance – Support for Perpetrator	125	5.5 %	193	10.1 %	318

A key area of resistance was the rejection of myths surrounding a perpetrator typology, an assumption that sexual assault offenders should fit within a specific mould. Generally, this prototypical model assumed a perpetrator was older, criminally-involved, uneducated, and generally lacked privilege or power. When users resisted this myth, they often highlighted that privileged individuals, such as Brock Turner or the Steubenville rapists, are just as likely to be perpetrators of sexual assault. Particularly in the Stanford Rape Case (n=165), 8.7% of tweets involved users opposing media and societal framing that suggested Turner's life was too promising to be culpable of sexual violence. As one user tweeted, "#1 takeaway from 2016: everyone has a

Brock Turner in their life. Don't ever assume the people in your life aren't capable of rape. They are" (Stanford Tweet 241). User resistance was also observed in the Steubenville case (n=57), as 2.5% of tweets involved users expressing disapproval that Ma'lik Richmond's or Trent May's athleticism was seen as redeeming enough to their personal character to warrant a sympathetic reaction despite their rape convictions (Steubenville Tweet 518).

In a similar sense, users rejected the myth that a rape conviction would ruin the perpetrator's life, a faulted belief that often underlies a rationale for not convicting an offender. Specifically, within the Steubenville case (n=91), 4.0% of users highlighted the juxtaposition between the perceived ruined life of Ma'lik Richmond and his eventual return to the Big Red Football team a year after his conviction. Comparably, users highlighted how it is problematic that the criminal justice system often prioritizes the future of offenders over mitigating trauma experienced by the victim: "[b]ecause in the Steubenville High School Rape Case, the ruined future of the two rapists was considered the tragedy" (Steubenville Tweet 820). Users specifically stressed how sports can exacerbate acceptance of this myth since the athlete's future potential became the focus after a sexual assault arrest, largely because, as one user explained, "football careers were more important than human dignity" (Steubenville Tweet 203). Through consistent demonstrations of how sympathy and leniency is disproportionately afforded to perpetrators, users illustrated the illogical assumptions underpinning the belief that sexual violence convictions ruin offenders' lives and are therefore, not worth the risk to prosecute.

Users additionally countered faulty conceptions of rape that minimized the severity of sexual violence. Specifically, in the Stanford case (n=210), 11.0% of users rejected this myth through re-centering the victim's perspectives or resisting the privileging of perpetrator-focused narratives. Users rejected a specific instance of this when Brock Turner's father stated in an open

letter that his son's conviction was "a steep price to pay for 20 minutes of action" (Miller 2016). The blatant lack of consideration of the long-term consequences for victims of sexual assault engendered users to challenge the tactlessness of Turner's father. As one user explained, "'20 minutes of action'? As a victim of such abuse, those 20 minutes feel like 20 years of torture" (Stanford Tweet 1666). Within the Steubenville case, users (n=192, 8.6%) called specific attention to the lack of recognition afforded to the victim, through tweets such as the "Steubenville Rapist Welcomed Back On the Football Team… Jane Doe's Still Raped" (Steubenville Tweet 219). By problematizing the modulating of sexual violence in all circumstances, users rejected the trivialization of rape while affirming the validity of the victim's experiences.

An additional way users resisted rape myths was through contesting the belief that an individual cannot be assaulted if they were intoxicated, reiterating how intoxication should never shift the culpability to the victim. Within the Stanford case especially, users (n=55, 2.9%) expressed frustration after Stanford University responded to the assault of "Emily Doe" through banning hard liquor from undergraduate parties. Users argued that this response perpetuates rape myths regarding alcohol as it conflates the rape of Emily Doe with hard liquor being available for undergraduate students. While these tweets manifested in different patterns, most of them included anger directed at institutions for likening sexual assault to a drunken mistake. As one user eloquently put, "maybe instead of banning hard liquor you ban idk RAPISTS & MOST DEFINITELY BROCK TURNER YOU LUMMOX AGHHH blaming rape on liquor is bullshit" (Stanford Tweet 91). What is notable about these reactions is that, despite similar circumstances

between the Steubenville and Stanford rape cases, only within the Stanford case did users explicitly

reject problematic conceptions of intoxication within instances of sexual assault[1].

In short, users resisted rape myths within both the Steubenville and Stanford rape cases

through the strategic use of counter-narratives, situating their own experiences amongst the cases,

and by opposing the underlying assumptions surrounding rape myths.

Critique of Elements of Rape Culture

In addition to resisting rape myths, users combatted the prevalence of sexual violence

through expressing critique and disapproval over structures that perpetuate rape culture. Although,

users were more likely to critique a facet of rape culture rather than resisting a specific rape myth.

As this section explains, users took to Twitter to dismiss social conditions that encouraged sexual

violence and, in the process, advocated for better responses to sexual victimization (see Table 5).

Table 4: Frequency of Critiquing Rape Culture

	Steubenville Rape Case (n = 2245)	**% of Relevant Steubenville**	**Stanford Rape Case (n = 1902)**	**% of Relevant Stanford**	**Total**
Critique of Sentencing	50	2.2 %	503	26.4 %	554
Critique of Perpetrator	68	3.0 %	220	11.6 %	288
Critique of Criminal Justice System (without petitions)	152	6.7 %	484	25.4 %	636
Critique of the Criminal Justice System			571	30.0 %	723

---

[1] Within the Steubenville rape case, 8 tweets (0.4% of the sample) resisted the rape myth that intoxication leads to sexual violence.

(including Petitions)					
Critique of School	172	7.6 %	67	3.5 %	239
Critique of the Lack of Consequences (without petitions)	472	21.0 %	280	14.7 %	752
Critique of the Lack of Consequences (including petitions)	895	40.0 %			1175
Critique of the Media	117	5.2 %	145	7.6 %	262
Critique of the Role of Sports	112	5.0 %	24	1.3 %	136

A way users engaged in this critique was through explicit opposition of the perpetrator's character, behaviour, or response to the assault. Through sometimes pejorative tweets, users critiqued the perpetrators in a way that countered the sympathetic framing of offenders often seen in the media. This reaction at times, manifested into a critique of all sympathetic or supportive reactions towards the offenders; users claimed these responses privileged the perpetrators narrative. As one user expressed: "[p]eople who are defending Rapist Brock Turner make me physically ill" (Stanford Tweet 1552). It is additionally worth noting that many users explicitly critiqued the role of the media in creating perpetrator-focused narratives throughout the cases. Through criticism of news coverage, interviews, and especially headlines, 5.2% of Tweets in the Steubenville case and 7.6% of Tweets in the Stanford rape case linked the media to the maintenance of rape culture.

In addition to expressing anger towards the perpetrators, users criticized the criminal justice system in regards to their handling of the Steubenville (n=152, 6.7%) and Stanford (n=571, 30.0%)

cases. These critiques were expressed in two different ways: an expression of disapproval towards a member of the criminal justice system such as a judge or policeman; or a denunciation of the system itself. Within the users' critique of members of the criminal justice system, tweets frequently criticized Judge Aaron Persky for his lenient sentence and perceived biased perspective. Users assembled, as 87 tweets included petitions calling for the recall or resignation of Judge Persky; as one user expressed, "we need to mobilize to remove judges that aren't doing their job" (Stanford Tweet 132). The institutional level critiques of the criminal justice system highlighted the structural nature of perpetuating rape culture as these systems can fundamentally disadvantage victims. The majority of tweets with institutional critiques aligned with the sentiment that any system that excuses this behaviour is a "mockery of justice" (Stanford Tweet 134).

Critiques of the criminal justice system often expanded into tweets condemning the lenient sentencing of the perpetrators. Within both cases, users drew attention to the light sentences afforded to the perpetrators, particularly in consideration of the severity and evidence present within these cases. In the Stanford case especially, users (n=503, 26.4%) opposed the leniency afforded to Brock Turner, as one user quipped, "14-year sentence to 6-month, then 6 month to 3? #whatweretheythinking" (Stanford Tweet 632). Within the Steubenville case (n=50, 2.2%), a similar sentiment was expressed while one user commented, "it'll be an absurdity if they're out in only one year" (Steubenville Tweet 376). Through highlighting the lack of accountability for perpetrators of sexual assault, users critiqued the light sentencing common with cases of sexual violence.

Users' built on this critique through opposing the lack of consequences afforded to perpetrators, drawing attention to how perpetrators can return to their lives in a way the victim never can. In the Steubenville case, 40.0% of tweets critiqued the lack of consequences with 423

tweets including a petition calling for the removal of Ma'lik Richmond from the Big Red football team. As one user criticized, "[u]sually when you rape someone, you go to jail. In Steubenville, you play football" (Twitter citation 24). Furthermore, users contrasted the everyday realities of sexual assault victims with the lack of consequences for offenders. As one user questioned, "Steubenville rapist could 'have his sex offender status changed.' Does the victim get magically un-raped too?" (Steubenville Tweet 884). Brock Turner's brief sentence rendered similar reactions, as one user explained: "[i]n 2017 I'll still be mad about Brock turner's 12 weeks in jail because when you're a girl in college sexual assault is very real & common" (Stanford Tweet 178). Through emphasizing the problematic nature of the lack of consequences for offenders, users resisted the faulty notion that all crimes are accompanied with real punishment. In general, the message users expressed about the handling of these cases was that "[t]his [was] the wrong message to send about #rape" (Steubenville Tweet 267).

Users frequently called for accountability, however, not just for the perpetrators, but also for the institutions that created a culture which facilitated these crimes. Schools as an institution were particularly critiqued, as users perceived they were prioritizing their own image and reputation over the rights of the victim. Within the Brock Turner rape case, a number of tweets (n=67, 3.5%) directed critique towards Stanford University as users supported protests on their campus and questioned why an elite university was creating an environment conducive to sexual assault. Users drew attention to the message sent when refusing to recognize a problem, "[o]f course @Stanford is a joke of a university", a user said, "[i]t's like they teach athletes to rape women" (Stanford Tweet 220). Similarly, in the Steubenville rape case (n=172, 7.6%), users drew attention to how sports and football were prioritized over the safety of their students. As one user

tweeted, "Steubenville High evidence[d] their attitude toward the right of a woman to say no by welcoming the rapist back" (Steubenville Tweet 461).

In summary, users expressed discontent over various areas of the Steubenville and Stanford cases, especially in terms of the reproduction of cultural conditions that permit sexual violence against women. The continuum of rhetoric seen by these users demonstrates a united stance advocating for social change, as users aim to fight against misconceptions about sexual violence and problematic facets of rape culture.

DISCUSSION

To further understand how users discussed the Steubenville and Stanford rape cases, I identify and discuss two themes that arose throughout my findings: digital resistance from Twitter users and a collective shared-consciousness amongst feminists online. Through examining these themes, we can make sense of how users constructed meaning on Twitter and engaged with content related to these high-profile cases of sexual violence. Specifically, how Twitter became not only a tool for individual expression, but also an outlet for users to provide a collective response to rape culture with the goal of implementing social change.

Digital Resistance

Considering the context of rape culture and rape myths, the tweets regarding the Steubenville and Stanford rape cases illustrated both a digital resistance to facets of rape culture and a response to a climate of institutionalized sexism. Within these tweets, a pattern towards social change and advocacy emerges, pointing to users employing Twitter as a tool for online feminist activism. I argue that through tweets about the Steubenville and Stanford rape cases, users redefine sexual violence by conceptualizing it within a victim-centered, feminist-oriented

perspective. Through re-writing the narratives underlying these cases and the rejection of rape myths, I suggest that Twitter users engaged in what Keller (2012) defines as virtual feminism. In this sense, Twitter is not just a tool for individual expression but an outlet for users to become active participants in the fight against rape culture. As for why the tweets in this data-set generally point towards feminist ideals, a possible explanation is that the users with the strongest opinions are those engaging in these online spaces. Those who are apathetic towards or mildly agree with the rape myths present in the framing of these cases would likely not turn to Twitter to express their opinions. Considering this, I am not arguing in this discussion that the shift towards digital feminist resistance is reflective of the entire realm of Twitter. Rather, by responding to the Steubenville and Stanford rape cases, I suggest these users have formed a space within Twitter that is expressive of their feminist ideals and allows users to play an active role in their digital advocacy work.

Twitter affords these users a sense of agency as they pursue tangible change through sharing petitions, advocating for community justice, and challenging rape-supportive tweets and institutions. In pursuit of accountability, users can directly and meaningfully engage in relevant tweets, movements, or online campaigns. After all, the recall of Judge Aaron Persky was largely credited to the large social media push calling for his removal (Astor 2018). I argue that Twitter is a way for users to feel empowered and recognized, as their contributions, regardless of the individual impact of a tweet, contribute to a larger push for social change. Because the magnitude of rape culture can be overwhelming, I believe Twitter offers users a tangible yet accessible way to be active participants in the sphere of activism. Twitter provides a medium to express yourself informally, thus providing these feminist users with the possibility to engage in digital resistance in a comfortable yet open space.

Although feminist Twitter users do not have the same influence as large newspapers or media sources, individual users can still resist rape-supportive framing in pursuit of a victim-centric feminist narrative. Dominant narratives can reinforce an understanding of sexual violence in a way that privileges the offender while shifting blame towards the victim. However, users can counter this discourse by attempting to re-shape news through situating personal experience and feminist-oriented ideas within the conservation. By providing an alternative account, one that is supported by sexual violence research and factual evidence, users can establish counter-narratives which directly oppose widespread myths which distort conceptions of sexual violence.

Moreover, users engaged in a call-out culture, a form of digital resistance which Mendes et al. (2018: 236-237) define as the "public's willingness to engage with resistance and challenges to sexism, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression via feminist uptake of digital communications". The general nature of Twitter warrants a call-out culture as social networks have been viewed as disputable, open to question or debate. Through exposing misogynistic or rape-supportive tweets, users are calling out while also increasing the relative visibility of feminism online. As Mendes et al. (2018:241) highlight, "[w]e can see that self-defined digital feminist activists feel very strongly that digital 'calling out' practices are a critical part of instigating change". Through strategic assertions of anger and sharing tweets exposing rape culture, users challenge the inherent conceptualization of the Steubenville and Stanford rape cases, while provoking further discussion and confronting dominant beliefs.

Collectivity and Solidarity

Twitter as a social medium offers users, particularly feminist users, a forum to engage and share ideas in a collective and unified manner. Within the context of the Steubenville and Stanford

rape cases, users have formed a digital collective where users are connected across social networks through digital ties and informal social networks. Even outside of hashtag-oriented movements (e.g. #meToo), users can leverage the relative popularity of the Steubenville and Stanford cases to form a collective response with the aim of combatting rape culture. While stylistically most tweets had their own flair, the content itself was relatively consistent, which I argue suggests a collective understanding amongst feminist Twitter users. A networked online platform such as Twitter plays an important role in developing this concerted understanding, as it offers an alternative space for users to connect and critically engage in pursuit of social change.

Although these users were not in direct conversation with each other, there is a solidarity among users as the patterns of meaning implicit in these tweets reflect a communitive response in challenging sexual violence. I suggest that through resisting and critiquing the Steubenville and Stanford rape cases, users have formed a shared-consciousness because of the relatively patterned nature of their tweets. This shared-consciousness amongst feminist users, I argue, entails a mutual understanding among the shared context of the Steubenville and Stanford rape cases. Although there has been no discussion of how these users should act within these spaces, there is still an inadvertently patterned nature to the online feminist resistance, suggesting a feminist shared-consciousness exists among these users. In a sense, the two cases have become symbolic, as users do not require context or elaboration to understand the implicit meaning of the tweets. Because of character restraints within Twitter, I am suggesting that users turn to these symbolic and shared understandings of the cases as they are forced to concisely express their ideas. To maximize the impact of their tweets while still conveying a powerful message, users may form this shared-consciousness built upon a mutual concord among feminist users responding to these cases of sexual violence.

Considering the interlinked nature of these users, I argue that tweets regarding the Steubenville and Stanford rape cases forged a symbolic solidarity, where Twitter users supported each other, built off other users' ideas, and discussed the multitude of dimensions within sexual assault. As Lokot (2017: 808) explains, "an affective public concentrated around a ritualized networked practice can potentially generate mediated feelings of connectedness among users". I believe the collaborative nature of the tweets can lead to feelings of solidarity as these users with common experiences can be supported and unified within a network of digital feminists. Since Twitter provides a space to share experiences of injustice, I believe that Twitter, specifically this collective community on Twitter, can allow for feelings of solidarity amongst participants. When looking at Twitter through a feminist lens, we can conceive this social network as both a feminist ally and a facilitator of connection, as Twitter allows for the collective nature of feminist users to engage within a multi-faceted understanding of sexual violence.

CONCLUSION

Given the rise of social media use, it is important that we consider not only how users are engaging within tweets regarding sexual violence, but the meaning within the tweets. Through looking at tweets discussing the Steubenville and Stanford rape cases, my findings illustrate digital resistance of rape myths as users constructed counter-narratives while deconstructing assumptions about rapes myths found within the cases. By critically reflecting on my findings through a feminist perspective, we can view the patterned nature of the tweets as users forming an online collective, constructing shared norms to convey unified meaning regarding rape myths and the perpetuation of rape culture.

Moving forward in an increasingly digitized world, we must consider how we can leverage spaces such as Twitter to create effective tools for feminist advocacy. By gaining a better

understanding of rape culture and how it presents itself in online spaces, we can utilize this knowledge of users' engagement within Twitter to create rape-prevention work that is both effective and permits users to connect in their preferred way. Further research is needed though regarding how users communicate with each other via social networks. This research could potentially be derived through exploring user engagement within threads on Twitter as opposed to isolated tweets. As digital advocacy is more important than ever (see Mendes et al. 2018), Twitter users' general resistance towards rape-supportive content demonstrates the potential for rape-prevention strategies and initiatives to eliminate rape culture.

REFERENCES

Astor, Maggie. 2018. "California Voters Remove Judge Aaron Persky, Who Gave a 6-Month Sentence for Sexual Assault." *The New York Times,* June 6. Accessed April 15, 2019 (https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/06/us/politics/judge-persky-brock-turner-recall.html).

Bonnycastle, Kevin Denys. 2012. *Stranger Rape: Rapists, Masculinity, and Penal Governance.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Braun, Virgina., and Victoria Clarke. 2006. "Using thematic analysis in psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3:77-101.

Brownmiller, Susan. 1975. *Against our will: Men, women and rape.* New York, N.Y: Simon and Schuster.

Dodge, Alexa. 2016. "Digitizing Rape Culture: Online Sexual Violence and the Power of the Digital Photograph." *Crime Media Culture* 12(1): 65-82.

Donde, Sapana D., Sally K. A. Ragsdale, Mary P. Koss, and Alyssa N. Zucker. 2018. "If It Wasn't Rape, Was it Sexual Assault? Comparing Rape and Sexual Assault Acknowledgement in College Women Who Have Experienced Rape. *Violence Against Women* 24(14): 1718.

Hlavka, Heather R. 2014. "Normalizing Sexual Violence: Young Women Account for Harassment and Abuse." *Gender and Society* 28(3): 337-358.

Jane, Emma A. 2016. "Online misogyny and feminist digilantism." *Continuum* 30(3): 284-297.

Keller, Jessalyn Marie. 2012. "Virtual Feminisms: Girls' Blogging Communities, Feminist Activism, and Participatory Politics." *Information, Communication & Society* 15(3): 429-447.

Klement, Kathryn R., Brad J. Sagarin, and John J. Skowronski. 2018. "Accusers Lie and Other Myths: Rape Myth Acceptance Predicts Judgements Made About Accusers and Accused Perpetrators in a Rape Case." *Sex Roles.*

Lokot, Tetyana. 2018. "#IAmNotAfraidToSayIt: stories of sexual violence as everyday politics speech on Facebook." *Information, Communication & Society* 21(6): 802-817.

Levin, Sam. 2016. "Ex-Stanford swimmer gets six months in jail and probation for sexual assault." *The Guardian*, June 2. Accessed April 15, 2019 (

https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jun/02/stanford-swimmer-sexual-assault-brock-allen-turner-palo-alto).

McMillan, Lesley. 2018. "Police officers' perceptions of false allegations of rape." *Journal of Gender Studies* 27(1): 9-21.

Mendes, Kaitlynn, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalyn Keller. 2018. "#MeToo and the promise and pitfalls of challenge rape culture through digital feminist activism." *European Journal of Women's Studies* 25(2): 236-246.

Miller, Michael E. 2016. "'A steep price to pay for 20 minutes of action': Dad defends Stanford sex offender." *The Washington Post,* June 6. Accessed April 16, 2019 (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/06/06/a-steep-price-to-pay-for-20-minutes-of-action-dad-defends-stanford-sex-offender/?utm_term=.072dd25ad06b).

Moody-Ramirez, Mia, and Hazel Cole. 2018. "Victim Blaming in Twitter Users' Framing of Eric Garner and Michael Brown." *Journal of Black Studies* 49(4): 383-407.

Murphy, Dhiraj. 2012. "Towards a Sociological Understanding of Social Media: Theorizing Twitter." *Sociology* 46(6): 1059-1073.

Oppel Jr., Richard A. 2013. "Ohio Teenagers Guilty in Rape That Social Media Brought to Life." *The New York Times,* March 17. Accessed April 15, 2019 (https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/18/us/teenagers-found-guilty-in-rape-in-steubenville-ohio.html?pagewanted=all).

Phipps, Alison., Jessica Ringrose, Emma Renold, and Carolyn Jackson. 2018. "Rape culture, lad culture and everyday sexism: researching, conceptualizing and politicizing new mediations of gender and sexual violence." *Journal of Gender Studies* 27(1): 1-8.

Rentschler, Carrie A. 2014. "Rape Culture and the Feminist Politics of Social Media." *Girlhood Studies* 7(1): 65-82.

Ryan, Kathryn M. 2011. "The Relationship between Rape Myths and Sexual Scripts: The Social Construction of Rape." *Sex Roles* 65: 774-782.

Salter, Michael. 2013. "Justice and revenge in online counter-publics: Emerging responses to sexual violence in the age of social media." *Crime Media Culture* 9(3): 225-242.

Sills, Sophie, Chelsea Pickens, Karishma Beach, Lloyd Jones, Octavia Calder-Dawe, Paulette Benton-Greig, and Nicola Gavey. 2016. "Rape culture and social media: young critics and a feminist counterpublic." *Feminist Media Studies* 16(6): 935-951.

Stubbs-Richardson, Megan, Nicole E Rader, and Arthur G Cosby. "Tweeting rape culture: Examining portrayals of victim blaming in discussions of sexual assault cases on Twitter." *Feminism & Psychology* 28(1): 90-108.

Suarez, Eliana, and Tahany M. Gadalla. 2010. "Stop Blaming the Victim: A Meta-Analysis on Rape Myths." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 25(11): 2010-2035.

Appendix A: Inclusion Criteria for Categorizing Tweets

Name of Category	Inclusion Criteria	Total Steubenville Count	Total Stanford Count
Critique of Sentencing	Criticism towards the sentencing of the perpetrator. Must be referencing the sentence applied, not just the lack of consequences for offenders	50	503
Critique of Perpetrator	Critique of the perpetrator's actions, character, or demeanor. Can be in the form of insults directed towards offender.	68	220
Critique of Criminal Justice System	Critique of the criminal justice system itself, as well as a critique of members of the criminal justice system including the police, the judge, and the judicial system.	152	571
Critique of School	Critique of the school board, the school itself, or the roles school play in perpetuating rape culture. References critiquing the school football team's decision to let Richmond back on team is included.	172	67
Critique of the Lack of Consequences	Critique of the lack of consequences for offenders after committing sexual assault, within their sentencing, and during their eventual re-entry into society.	895	280
Critique of the Media	A critique of the role of the media in perpetuating rape culture. Includes general critique of media headlines and media personnel (e.g. CNN reporter who was sympathetic to Steubenville rapists).	117	145
Critique of the Role of Sports	Critique specifically of the role of sports in perpetuating rape culture or the role of specific sports. Just a reference to sports will not be included	112	24

	without the formalized critique regarding rape culture or rape myths. Also critiques of the Big Red football team will be excluded unless they are in the context of rape culture.		
Critique of the Community	Critique of the role of the community / town in perpetuating rape culture, victim blaming, and ignoring the assault. Includes references to role of fraternity community.	75	3
Race is a Factor	Acknowledgement that race has a role in the prosecution, conviction, sentencing, or aftermath of the case	12	110
Race is Not a Factor	Rejecting the notion that race had a role in the prosecution, conviction, sentencing, or aftermath of the case	3	6
Rape Culture is Real	An acknowledgement of the role of rape culture, use of the words 'rape culture', or mention of a culture where victim blaming, lack of consequences, or disbelief is common.	324	237
Resistance to rape being minimized	A resistance to the myth that "rape is not that bad", "it's just rape", "it wasn't actually rape, it was sexual assault", minimizing the trauma of rape, and reducing the victim's experience.	192	210
Resistance to women lying about rape allegations	A resistance to the myth that women commonly lie about rape and make false allegations. Additionally, a resistance to any suggestion that women benefit from sexual assault allegations or claiming that people will never know what really happened during the crime.	13	4
Resistance to intoxication as an excuse for assault	A resistance to the myth that if an individual was drunk, then they could not have been raped or assaulted. Additionally, resisting any suggestion that a victim's rape was a product of	8	55

	their intoxication or any fixation on a victim's decision to drink.		
Resistance of men having no control sexual desires	A resistance to the myth that men have no control over their sexual impulses which justifies aggressive coercive behavior. A resistance to any "boys will be boys", or "what can you expect from a man" comments.	9	4
Resistance of victim blaming	A resistance to any blame attributed towards the victim. A resistance towards the belief that if a woman did not do something (i.e., did not dress that way, did not drink, did not walk alone at night), then she would not have been raped.	52	36
Resistance of faulty definitions of consent	A resistance towards any faulty understandings of sexual assault that suggest that intoxication allows for consent, that previous relationships merit consent, or that if the victim consented earlier she cannot rescind that consent. Reaffirming the fact that if an individual is unconscious they cannot consent is included within this category.	24	36
Resistance of perpetrator ideology	A resistance towards any perpetrator ideology that suggests only certain types of individuals (i.e., unsuccessful, violent, poor) commit sexual violence. A resistance towards excusing the behavior because of something that does not fit in the typological mold (i.e., their athletic position or institution).	57	165
Resistance of idea that rape allegations	A resistance towards the belief that a false rape allegation may ruin an	91	24

ruin an individual's life	individual's life and that because of that we should not charge an offender. A resistance towards an overt concern about the future outcomes of the perpetrator.		
Resistance of support for perpetrators	A resistance towards any form of support towards the perpetrator or any sympathy. This includes resisting sympathetic framing of perpetrators from the media, school boards, or the court.	125	193
Rape is minimized	Any instance of rape being minimized, which includes the belief that "rape is not that bad", "it's just rape", "it wasn't actually rape, it was sexual assault", any minimizing of the trauma of rape, and any tweets reducing the victim's experience.	12	7
Rape did not happen / the woman lied	Any tweet representing a belief that women commonly lie about rape and make false allegations. Additionally, any suggestion that a woman would benefit from sexual assault allegations or any claim that people will never know what really happened during the crime.	11	2
Alcohol warrants nonconsensual sex	Any tweet specifying that if an individual was drunk, then they would not have been raped or assaulted. Additionally, any suggestion that a victim's rape was a product of their intoxication or any fixation on a victim's decision to drink.	0	0
Men have no control over their sexual desires	A belief that men have no control over their sexual impulses which justifies aggressive coercive behavior. Additionally, any "boys will be boys", or "what can you expect from a man" comments.	0	0

Consent is misunderstood	Any tweet attributing blame towards the victim. Any suggestion that if a woman did not do something (i.e., did not dress that way, did not drink, did not walk alone at night), then she would not have been raped.	0	0
Perpetrator Ideology	The belief that only certain types of individuals (i.e., unsuccessful, violent, poor) commit sexual violence. Any excusing of sexually violent behavior because of something that does not fit in the typological mold (i.e., their athletic position or institution).	9	13
Support of Sentencing	Any support directed towards the sentencing of the offenders. Including any claims highlighting that it was a good sentence or that they are happy the individual got sentenced.	5	9
Rape allegations will ruin an individual's life	Any tweet that suggests a false rape allegation may ruin an individual's life and that because of that we should not charge an offender. Additionally, any overt concern about the future outcomes of the perpetrator.	0	0