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SEXUAL ASSAULT IN THE NEWS

by Sydney Blair

A Thesis submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Science in Sociology: Human Services Planning & Administration in

Sociology and Corrections Department

Minnesota State University—Mankato

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SEXUAL ASSAULT IN THE NEWS

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has evaluated the presence of blame, myths, and stigma that sexual assault survivors experience online and within interactions with others. In the era of the #MeToo movement, has that changed? With perpetrators recently being held legally accountable for their crimes, my research addresses the current representation(s) of sexual assault through a content analysis of existing news media. I found a variety of rhetoric that supports survivors, #MeToo and perpetrators accountability, with additional evidence that negatively counters those positive changes. My research is important because these findings contribute to social science literature by examining the current representation of sexual assault in media through a variety of news outlets.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence and assault affects over a third of women living in the US (The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey 2017). These rates have remained consistent for the past twenty years—and little has changed in the ways that the police and legal system approach sexual assault cases. Victims who speak up are told to prepare themselves for having to go through law enforcement, campuses and universities, and a legal system that often declines to prosecute assailants—all revealing systemic inequalities in the ways our society deals with violent crimes against women (Burnett et al. 2009; Frazier and Haney 1996; Mason and Monckton-Smith 2008). With no real indicators that sexual assault is going away anytime soon, we must address the problems surrounding its stigmatization. This change can be led by one of the biggest sources of our cultural information: the media (Zaleski et al. 2016).

The #MeToo movement, founded by advocate Tarana Burke, set out to address the inadequate resources available to sexual assault survivors like herself. Having generated popularity on the social media platforms Twitter and Facebook, the #MeToo movement sounded the alarm for raising consciousness surrounding sexual assault. After decades of injustice, fellow survivors came forward to share their stories of victimization. This movement challenged social institutions in ways that exposed high profile perpetrators. While these events are highly publicized, I acknowledge the injustices that persist for other survivors whose stories have not been given justice. Tarana Burke articulates the movement's progress by saying "Now we can raise our voices, we can galvanize [ourselves], and that's a phenomenal leap from where we were 30 years ago"

(Davey 2019:NP). The #MeToo movement is much more well-known than it was at its inception in 2006 and is often referenced when topics of sexual assault arise.

Has #MeToo changed the way survivors are supported or represented? With news media being such a major source of information on current events, looking into the content of these messages can tell us a lot about the popular discourse surrounding sexual assault. There is research on language in the media like journalists minimizing sexual violence (Hindes and Fileborn 2019; Pepin 2016) and rape myths in the news (Franiuk, Seefeldt, and Vandello 2008; Mason and Monckton-Smith 2008; O'Hara 2012; Sacks, Ackerman, and Shlosberg 2018). However, not a lot of information on if or how things have changed in the representation of sexual assault. While previous research has analyzed the representation of either the survivor or the perpetrator, my research took on both the representation of the survivor and the perpetrator. Both the representation of perpetrators and survivors are vital to the portrayal of sexual assault, as one cannot be referenced while ignoring the other.

Given what we know about past representations and what we have seen in terms of the #MeToo movement challenging misconceptions of sexual assault, what, if anything, has changed in the media coverage of sexual assault? "The movement encourages women to speak up about experiences of sexual harassment and abuse, seeks to hold perpetrators accountable for their actions, and provides survivors with support" (Murphy 2019:63). To what degree, if any, has the media changed their reporting and characterization of abuse, potential perpetrators, and support for victims? Broadly

speaking, how has #MeToo impacted the ways in which media outlets discuss and describe instances of sexual assault?

My research examined the language and discourse used within the press to examine sexual assault. To fill the gap in the literature on sexual assault, a content analysis of newspaper articles and news transcripts were utilized. By conducting a content analysis, this enabled me to generate data on how sexual assault is currently portrayed in the media. All sources in the sample were pulled from the top six circulated news media outlets in the United States. This means that these newspapers are the most reviewed and could have the largest impact on educating and impacting readers. For newspapers to be included in my sample, they needed to include topics of sexual violence and reference the #MeToo movement in their texts. Newspaper publications vary in the number of articles that contain both references to #MeToo and sexual violence which is described more in my *Methods* section. While most of the existing literature has not utilized grounded theory, my research did, as it is the best methodological approach to understanding texts without restricting findings.

My research could potentially benefit survivors' recovery and weaken rape culture. While not everyone internalizes what is referenced in the news, the way sexual assault is represented is known to impact survivors (Stubbs-Richardson, Rader, and Cosby 2018; Weiss 2009; The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey 2017). The impact that media has on survivors is reason enough to rid the news of rape myths. That said, news media is also very influential in shaping opinions of those who have not experienced sexual victimization (O'Hara 2012; Soothill 2004). While we have

the agency to reject news that goes against one's ideas, news is nonetheless an important source of information. My research contributes to the existing body of literature by providing a "big picture" analysis of how sexual assault is portrayed by the most prolific news media sources in the United States. My motivation to fill this gap follows alongside the goals of the #MeToo movement as well as my background in sexual assault advocacy.

My thesis research is organized as follows. First, I review literature on sexual assault and violence. Then, I discuss how rape culture operates within popular and media culture. In the third section I address previous literature on sexual assault in relation to the media. Next, I discuss the techniques used to neutralize the severity of sexual assault. Lastly, I discuss how these all fit within the #MeToo movement. Then, I outline my research methodology for studying the ways sexual assault is framed in the post-#MeToo era. After framing how I prepared to do the research, I present the findings of my study and end with a discussion on the conclusions.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I begin by presenting an overview of sexual assault to best understand the basics of my research question. I then move onto the cultural relevance of how sexual assault is socially negotiated in harmful ways. This information helps preface the literature on sexual assault in the media done by other researchers. That research helps frame the ways we know historically sexual assault has been referenced within different media outlets. After reviewing the ways sexual assault survivors are evaluated, I discuss the ways in which individuals and institutions avoid criminalizing perpetrators. This chapter ends with recognizing the cultural relevance of #MeToo when discussions of sexual assault arise.

Climate of Sexual Assault

According to the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN 2020b:NP), sexual assault includes, but is not limited to, “attempted rape, fondling or unwanted sexual touching, forcing a victim to perform sexual acts, or penetration of the victim’s body, also known as rape”. The Office on Women’s Health expands on examples of sexual assault like “peeping, exhibitionism, sexual harassment or threats, forcing someone to pose for sexual pictures, and sending someone unwanted texts or sexts” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2019:NP). By most definitions, sexual assault encompasses numerous forms of consent-less based sexual violence (LeMaire, Oswald, and Russell 2016). Therefore, I use “sexual assault” as a term to encompass all forms of sexual-based violence.

To further clarify the terms that are used throughout my research and in the literature review, I denote the term “rape” to refer to, “a form of sexual assault [however,] not all sexual assault is rape” (RAIIN 2020b:NP). Rape is defined as sexual penetration of a person—including both men and women. It is a term that has previously been used with a narrow connotation—specifically, rape has previously been thought to be something women alone experience (Herman 1984; Young and Maguire 2003). Alternatively, sexual assault is a broad term, used to describe all forms of sexual victimization, including rape (i.e. date rape or marital rape), but its definition is not constrained to gender or type of rape (Mason and Monckton-Smith 2008; Young and Maguire 2003). In the State of Minnesota, rape is not used as a term to describe sexual victimization, it varies between five degrees of criminal sexual misconduct (RAIIN 2020c). For the purposes of my research, sexual assault will be defined as all forms of sexual victimization, as it is the most inclusive.

When it comes to sexual assault, around one in three women experience sexual violence at some point in their lives (The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey 2017). This is not to say that men will not be sexually assaulted, but it is less likely; one in six men have experienced a sexual assault (The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey 2017). Additionally, those with the highest risk for rape and sexual assault are women, age twelve to thirty-four (RAIIN 2020a).

It had been well documented that “sexual assault is most often committed by someone the victim knows” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2019:NP). Furthermore, RAIIN (2020a) expands by adding that most of the time, the perpetrator is

an intimate partner or an acquaintance. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “women and men commit sexual assault, but more than ninety percent of people who commit sexual violence against women are men” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2019:NP). Racial minorities are sexually victimized at disproportionately higher rates than other racial groups (The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey 2017). When it comes to identifying injustices experienced by the LGBTQ+ community, The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (2017) only identifies this group one time in a 272-page report—a revealing statement about how much research and information we don’t have about victimization in the LGBTQ+ community. Stotzer (2009) finds that on average 1 in 2 LGBTQ+ persons experience sexual victimization. The coupling of these qualities—racial and ethnic background, age, and sexuality/gender orientation—all form intersecting layers of oppression for individuals experiencing sexual violence.

The data on the prevalence and distribution of sexual assault among the population should be interpreted with caution, as sexual assaults are often underreported crimes (Burnett et al. 2009; Frazier and Haney 1996; Mason and Monckton-Smith 2008). The actual number of sexual assaults are likely to be much higher than reported, as reluctance to report is often due to the harmful stigmas that survivors experience (Herman 1984). Underreporting is an issue because it reflects the strain between the legal system holding perpetrators accountable and survivors getting the support they need (Du Mont, Miller, and Myhr 2003). Adding to this gap in knowledge, agencies gathering statistics about sexual assault may also be using an outdated, narrow definition of rape to

collect data (Casey and Nurius 2006). Narrow definitions are problematic as it leaves out a large percentage of people who are sexually victimized in different ways. This is not to say that every survivor of sexual assault should report to law enforcement as there are many different reasons one would choose to remain anonymous. But when asking survivors specifically why they did not file a police report, some survivors stated they were suspicious of the criminal justice system and their ability to hold perpetrators legally accountable (Frazier and Haney 1996).

Of the reported cases of sexual assault, less than 25% are prosecuted (Frazier and Haney 1996). Only the “strongest,” most severe kinds of assault are seen as cases that are “winnable” by prosecutors, resulting in formal charges being filed against a perpetrator (Frazier and Haney 1996). The tendency to prosecute only “slam dunk” sexual assault cases is replicated in media depictions of sexual violence, where only the perpetrators of the most gruesome kinds of violence are held socially accountable online. This strengthens the perspective that if cases are not easily won on behalf of survivors, that it is possible that they may be lying, forcing survivors into a state of perfection when perfection doesn’t exist. Physical severity of a sexual assault also increases the likelihood that a victim will report the crime to law enforcement (Du Mont et al. 2003). Media depictions of sexual violence often embrace rape myths of a “real” rape only when they present victimization that ends in injury (Du Mont et al. 2003). Cases are also more likely to make it to prosecution when the perpetrator is a stranger (Frazier and Haney 1996), possibly one factor in the continuation of the myth that sexual assault victims are most commonly victimized by a stranger (Mason and Monckton-Smith 2008). As trainings for

professionals working with survivors are being adapted across careers, there are still negative perceptions about who gets sexually assaulted and how (Du Mont et al. 2003). I further address these myths in the next section.

Even more concerning is the popular discourse surrounding sexual assault. The language used is limited to “survivor” and “victim,” and both are employed to represent individuals who have experienced sexual-based violence (Young and Maguire 2003). Both terms refer to the same person, but the context in which we situate them and how we describe them can impact the way we think about victimized people in general. The term “victim” is associated with images of injury and weakness, while “survivor” is viewed as an empowering identity; typically, those who have been assaulted utilize empowerment discourse to emphasize the growth and strength they have gained post-victimization (Young and Maguire 2003). For the purpose of my research, I reference those who have been sexually victimized as both “survivors” and “victims” because the literature also varies in its use. The language used in the field of sexual victimization is not consistent but giving someone the label of “survivor” enables them to reject a status that is less stigmatizing than “victim.” Leisenring (2006) adds that using the term “victim” is closely associated with responsibility for victimization. When individuals are referred to as “victims” in the media, it provides limited opportunities for how they can reject a label that is less stigmatizing and choose labels for themselves. But also calling someone a “survivor” initially may confuse viewers as being a “victim” connotes the victimization from a crime. In general, the language surrounding sexual assault is problematic as each word creates meaning when used within context.

Rape Culture

“Our society [includes] rape culture because it fosters and encourages rape by teaching [men] and [women] that it is natural and normal for sexual relations to involve aggressive behavior on the part of [men]” (Herman 1984:52). Living in a patriarchal society means that men and women have been socialized to view aggressiveness on behalf of men as a “natural” gender characteristic (Hunnicut 2009). Sexual assault is a mechanism of power and control so therefore its presence in our culture is more than just coincidental (Pepin 2016). Understanding rape culture within the context of patriarchal society enables us to view gendered notions of conceptions of power and how they impact our perceptions of sexual assault. Herman (1984) finds that we support and create rape culture when men are socialized to adhere to dominant masculine values. Its “a culture that normalizes, trivializes, and quietly condones male sexual assault against women, blaming female victims while subtly celebrating male predators” (Wilhelm 2015:NP). Rape culture and domination of women didn’t just develop from popular culture, it is derived from English and colonial laws that viewed women as property of their father or spouse (Donovan 1994; Herman 1984).

While popular culture did not create rape culture, it supports and strengthens its historical roots. For men, sexual achievements are viewed as rites of passage and aggressiveness is not frowned upon as “boys will be boys” (Giraldi and Monk-Turner 2017; Weiss 2009). These aggressive, “sex-linked traits” are often used to excuse criminal behavior as biologically deterministic (Scott and Lyman 1968). While excuses and justifications are made for perpetrators of sexual violence, sexual victimization is

very much “learned socially through interaction with others” (Scully and Marolla 1984:261). For women, these sex-linked characteristics means they socialized to view being “soft” and “helpless” as characteristics that illustrate femininity (Giraldi and Monk-Turner 2017; West and Zimmerman 1987). The pervasiveness of rape culture is imbedded throughout our culture, to the point where it is hard to view or acknowledge the hegemonic masculinity of men or hyper-sexualization of women as “sex objects” as something other than “normal” expressions of masculinity and femininity.

Rape culture is the normalization of violence against women and minority gender groups as a way to systematic oppress them. “Rape culture is perpetuated through the use of misogynistic language, the objectification of women’s bodies, and the glamorization of sexual violence, thereby creating a society that disregards women’s rights and safety” (Marshall 2020:NP). These discrediting claims come in the form of rape myths. Rape myths are “prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims and rapists” (Burt 1980:217). The existence of rape myths throughout social media platforms and media headlines reinforce rape culture (Stubbs-Richardson et al. 2018). Rape myths take active form within rape culture—they offer a cultural scaffolding or suggestions for how others can or should critique claims of victimization and view potential perpetrators.

Burt (1980) provides examples of rape myths that discredit survivors and rationalize the victimization of others in the media. These excuses tend to rely on biological assumptions such as “Rapist are sex-starved, insane, or both” while victimization is often denied through statements like “Only bad girls get raped” (Burt 1980:217). Additional rape myths include discrediting information related to substance

use of the victim, their delayed reporting of the abuse (von Sikorski and Saumer 2020), their personal credibility, or deciding not to do a medical sexual assault examination (Bohmert et al. 2019). Other myths include that all perpetrators are strangers, that sexual assault occurs in public, and that there are a lot of false reports (Mason and Monckton-Smith 2008). Sexual assault survivors inhabit a culture that is permeated with these myths, which serve to undermine their personal experiences and cast doubt on their claims (Mason and Monckton-Smith 2008). Perpetrators are represented as “sickos” who are very different from the everyday guy and are uncommon men. Instead, rapists are presented as “beasts,” distinguishable through their obviously violent and anti-social traits (Mason and Monckton-Smith 2008).

Rape myths are harmful to survivors and are used to discredit claims of people who have experienced assault when they come forward or discuss their victimization (Franiuk et al. 2008). Denying someone’s victimization by endorsing rape myths can alter the way survivors interpret their situation (LeMaire et al. 2016). Accepting rape myths that are presented throughout popular culture not only give perpetrators a language to pull from (Scully and Marolla 1984) but influences the recovery experience of those who have been victimized (LeMaire et al. 2016). Rape myths in the media also misinform the public about the reality of sexual assault and prevent progress to end stigmatization (Stubbs-Richardson et al. 2018).

Rape myths extend to perpetrators as well, concealing men’s intentional participation in such acts (Mason and Monckton-Smith 2008). These myths include that sexual aggression is natural (Weiss 2009), that the situation was an accident, or that the

situation is trivial or not worth the attention that it is being given (Mason and Monckton-Smith 2008). Other researchers examining media reports of sexually violent crimes found that often the victimization is explained away through the rape myth that men are natural aggressors (O'Hara 2012; Franiuk et al. 2008). Victim-blaming lifts blame from the offenders' shoulders as they are forgotten in the context of attributing negligence to the victim. Individuals can do this either with their own language that adheres to culturally accepted excuses or justifications or journalists do it for them when wanting to make stories more interesting (O'Hara 2012). The excuses and justifications that perpetrators or journalists use are further explored later in the chapter in the section on "Avoiding Criminalization."

Sexual Assault in the Media

Media coverage of sexual assault cases and the language authors use to describe victims and perpetrators are important in shaping the experiences of those who have been victimized. If such coverage represents support, some stigma is relieved, but the public nature of media coverage also can create a platform for victim-blaming (Kenney 2002; Zaleski et al. 2016). Previous research finds that, oddly enough, survivors received more sympathy from strangers than family at times (Kenney 2002). Alternatively, victim-blaming from strangers is more impactful on survivors than when family and friend's victim-blamed the survivor (Kenney 2002). Yes, victim-blaming from strangers is impactful, but if strangers are supportive, their support can serve to buffer victim-blaming from family and friends for the survivor (Kenney 2002). This emphasizes the impact that

media and its influence on public perception has on the coping experience of individual survivors.

When people other than the survivor evaluate the credibility of someone's sexual assault, blame may not be attributed directly as it can be assigned indirectly with creative language (Felson and Palmore 2018). Indirectly blaming someone consists of language that directs attention away from the perpetrator. It criticizes the victim's decisions for being in that situation and deems them responsible for the outcome but is mitigated by feelings of sympathy (Felson and Palmore 2018). One could view indirect blame as less overtly critical and make blaming someone seem "nicer" when critiquing a survivor. Direct blaming is not mitigated by any sort of sympathy and explicitly blames the survivor for putting themselves in harm's way. Both forms are considered victim-blaming as they believe to some degree that the decisions made by the victimized party predisposed them to abuse (Felson and Palmore 2018).

Felson and Palmore (2018) examined how this indirect and direct blaming is distributed in stories of sexual assault compared to other crimes. Researchers found that respondents were more likely to interpret the experience of sexual assault, rather than robbery, as the result of the victim's own actions (Felson and Palmore 2018). Victims of sexual assault were more indirectly blamed from the mitigating factor of sympathy (Felson and Palmore 2018). This more discrete form of blame normalizes the blaming of survivors which contributes to rape culture. The presence of indirect blame in media has been found in previous studies and its impact on survivors warrants the need for further

investigation (Franiuk et al. 2008; Sacks et al. 2018; Stubbs-Richardson et al. 2018; Mason and Monckton-Smith 2008; Felson and Palmore 2018; Bohmert et al. 2019).

Previous research on the presence of rape myths in the media have found that newspapers and media coverage contribute to rape culture in indirect ways (Sacks et al. 2018). This indirect victim-blaming can be seen in the ways that sympathy for a victim is allocated. Sacks et al. (2018) found that sympathy for victims of sexual assault was only allocated when the claims of victimization were congruent with rape myth stereotypes. In other words, people were more likely to have sympathy for victims if they were seriously injured, attacked by a stranger, or physically fought back (Sacks et al. 2018). Sacks et al.'s (2018) study focused primarily on local newspapers while others like Franiuk et al. (2008) evaluated the content from more highly circulated sources. Franiuk et al. (2008:794) was able to identify more direct forms of rape myths in newspapers like "she's lying" and "she wanted it."

Sympathy is one of the biggest reasons people feel uncomfortable assigning direct blame and choose to use creative language, including indirect blame, to continue to criticize victims (Felson and Palmore 2018). When individuals are deemed worthy of sympathy by family and friends, they are labeled victims, not survivors (Kenney 2002). Leisenring (2006) also supports the finding that sympathy and need for help is a requirement to earn the identity of a "victim." Even though sexual assault survivors who have "earned" sympathy are now accepted as victims of a crime, they may still be treated as deviant in media coverage for participating in risk behaviors, such as drinking or staying out late alone at night (Kenney 2002). Kenney (2002) also notes that not all

survivors get sympathy, and those who do, are often pressured to recover quickly before family or friends become disinterested and withdraw their support. When sympathy for a victim is expressed in media, it portrays a “real” image or frames for the public what conditions qualify as assault and therefore sympathy (Mason and Monckton-Smith 2008). These conditions placed on victims to gain sympathy all depend on the relationship to the perpetrator, location, and type of sexual assault (Mason and Monckton-Smith 2008).

Another category of blame, advice giving, is mitigated by sympathy and found in previous research on sexual assault in media. Research shows that often women give other women advice when topics of sexual assault are being covered (Giraldi and Monk-Turner 2017). This highlights the responsibility that is placed on women to avoid being victimized (Giraldi and Monk-Turner 2017). This type of interaction shifts blame away from perpetrators as they are no longer being criticized. Instead, the conversation is shifted to how women can better protect themselves from stereotypical kinds of perpetrators (Giraldi and Monk-Turner 2017). Victims must walk a fine line as they are told to be more assertive when it comes to fending off perpetrators but not to be overly aggressive (Hindes and Fileborn 2019).

Zaleski et al. (2016) found similar victim-blaming techniques when advice and instructions were given to survivors on how to remedy their situation. In fact, one of the most prominent themes in Zaleski et al.’s (2016) research on the comment sections of news articles posted online revealed that victim-blaming/questioning accounted for 25.8% of all comments coded. Included were such a diverse range of negativity that researchers divided the category into six sub-categories. Examples from the comments

include questioning if the accusations were even real or telling survivors how to best handle their victimization (Zaleski et al. 2016). Zaleski et al. (2016) reviewed the online comments of people on posts regarding sexual assault. Such studies illustrate that those people interacting online are not inventing ways to minimize fault, but instead are pulling from language that is socially accepted and common in popular media (Mills 1940; Weiss 2009).

Previous research has highlighted another indirect blaming technique found during apologies by perpetrators. According to Schumann and Dragotta (2020), only a quarter of men who were named in sexual assault allegations following the #MeToo movement have apologized for their crimes. While those perpetrators are attempting to hold themselves accountable, a different group of men did the opposite as “over half of these men have chosen to deny the allegations against them” (Schumann and Dragotta 2020:1). Although public apologies provide the opportunity for perpetrators to hold themselves accountable, they also open the door for perpetrators to deny or justify accusations, neutralize their actions, and overall change the narrative of sexual assault. These techniques are analyzed further in the next section, “Avoiding Criminalization.”

Following the accountability of perpetrators, Nigro et al. (2019) investigated their public apologies of sexual assault. Researchers wanted to know how perpetrators would respond to claims of sexual assault by either focusing on themselves or the survivor. If perpetrators would apologize in ways that focused on their admission, regret, and restitution, they were ultimately behaving in a self-focused way (Nigro et al. 2019). Perpetrators would also apologize by focusing on the victim, and acknowledge what they

did, show remorse, and offer reparations, making their apology appear more valid (Nigro et al. 2019). Nigro et al. (2019) found that if a perpetrator focused on themselves, an apology was not seen as sincere. However, when perpetrators accounts focused on the needs of the ones they hurt, apologies were more likely to be seen as legitimate (Nigro et al. 2019). Other researchers have also highlighted how apologies open the door for perpetrators to focus on themselves by seeking a pardon by others (Scully and Marolla 1984). Nigro et al. (2019) found that by giving an apology that focuses on the victims' needs, one is making an attempt to be held accountable for their actions. Quotes from perpetrators or quotes from someone on behalf of perpetrators are used in newspaper articles for claims-making. Identifying these in newspaper articles points to the amount of consciousness raising the press is participating in.

Other indirect methods of blaming survivors within media coverage include the framing of incidents within the headlines of news reports. These are portrayed in the media by the way journalists indirectly ascribe blame in headlines and articles. Franiuk et al. (2008) found that the survivor was most often referred to as an accuser instead of the alleged victim. Calling an alleged victim, an accuser, signifies rape myths associated with doubt for survivors (Franiuk et al. 2008). Advocates in the field push for the use of "alleged victim" instead of "accuser," as "accuser" takes action and can imply the victim is the one causing effect on the perpetrator (Franiuk et al. 2008).

Until a case is complete, a victim's claims cannot be validated, therefore they are known as an "alleged victim" or "victim" until proven otherwise. When investigating current claims of victim-blaming in the media, survivors were doubted 40% of the time

(Siefkes-Andrew and Alexopoulos 2019). When the media describe perpetrators of sexual assault, background information like the perpetrators' athletic achievements were often included in the stories (Siefkes-Andrew and Alexopoulos 2019). By focusing on the achievements of attackers, wrongdoing is ignored, responsibility is taken away from the perpetrator, and the normalization of rape culture permeates the article's representation of sexual assault (Siefkes-Andrew and Alexopoulos 2019).

Berns (2001) follows framing in the media as it impacts individual viewers and how they perceive a social problem. According to Worthington (2020:65) there was a highly controversial article published by journalist Bari Weiss titled "Aziz Ansari is guilty. Of not being a mind reader." In this article by Bari Weiss, the journalist supports the alleged perpetrator Aziz Ansari because the victim did not explicitly deny him her consent when engaging in sexually activity but instead said her nonverbal body language and verbal cues should have been enough to deny him consent. Ultimately, everyone is evaluating Aziz Ansari victim to be blameworthy for not being a good victim and support Aziz in that perpetrators shouldn't know to stop with anything other than "no."

Worthington (2020) evaluated the comments section where a majority of commenters felt sympathetic towards the perpetrator and supportive of the author Bari Weiss' standpoint. Some commenters even felt that this story hurt the credibility of the #MeToo movement, which has critiqued the rape myth that suggests that only the most vicious forms of assault are validated as criminal by the public (Hindes and Fileborn 2019; Worthington 2020). By taking the side of the accused, it means that support for the victim is nonexistent. The studies on sexual assault in print news media are important because the

way sexual assault is represented, influences survivors and educates viewers (Franiuk et al. 2008).

Avoiding Criminalization

As mentioned previously, indirectly blaming someone consists of language that directs attention away from the perpetrator and criticizes the victim's decisions for being in that situation (Felson and Palmore 2018). Exactly how are people indirectly blaming survivors of sexual assault? One example can be found in accounts of the event given by perpetrators. Behavior that violates a value society holds is usually explained with an account. Accounts come in two forms, either a justification or excuse, and they vary culturally (Scott and Lyman 1968). "Excuses and justifications are socially approved vocabularies which neutralize an act or its consequences when one or both are called into question" (Scott and Lyman 1968:46). Justifications accept responsibility but deny the problem associated with the act by using "socially approved vocabularies that neutralize an act or its consequences when one or both are called into question" (Scott and Lyman 1968:51). While excuses do not accept responsibility, they acknowledge that there is a problem; they simply state that it is not their problem to be responsible for (Scott and Lyman 1968). Excuses as well use "socially approved vocabularies" that enable them to avoid the characterization of blame (Scott and Lyman 1968). There is meaning and reasoning that goes into explaining the motives that went into an act (Mills 1940).

Closely related, excuses and justification have differences and their uses by perpetrators and journalists can be explored individually. When actions are questioned,

excuses are the socially acceptable concepts that people defend themselves with. The classic definition defined by Scott and Lyman (1968) included accidents, defeasibility, biological deterministic, or scapegoating. What Scott and Lyman (1968) refer to as “appeals to biological drives” is a common excuse that actions are a “natural” cause of human behavior. In the case of sexual assault, these claims are traditionally sex-based claims and excuse the perpetrator for being responsible for their actions (Scott and Lyman 1940). Vocabularies are culturally based, and acceptable forms are generated and pulled from to excuse and justify criminal actions. Those situating their vocabularies in such a way are trying to align their language with other accepted patriarchal norms, like sexual aggressiveness for men and women being too passive (Hindes and Fileborn 2019; Mills 1940).

Sykes and Matza (1957) focus on how delinquents avoid legal responsibility from using justification techniques that defend their criminal actions. These techniques are embedded in the following five forms of justifications: denying responsibility, denying injury, denying victimization, condemning those who condemn the acts, and appealing to a larger group (Sykes and Matza 1957). In denying victimization to a person, perpetrators neutralize the wrongness of an act because a victim was deserving (Sykes and Matza 1957). “In this sense, the delinquent both has his cake and eats it too, for he remains committed to the dominant normative system and yet so qualifies its imperatives that violates are ‘acceptable’ if not ‘right’” (Sykes and Matza 1957:667). These techniques protect perpetrators and deflect blame to others (Sykes and Matza 1957). Scott and Lyman (1968) pull from Goffman (1961) that “sad tales” are another form of

justification. It deflects wrongness by describing previous victimization of themselves that led them to their current state of behavior (Scott and Lyman 1968).

These techniques described by Scott and Lyman (1968) can be found in the media as well. Pepin (2016) investigated the coverage of intimate partner violence among celebrities in the media. She found that journalists often minimized the violence, did not include the consequences for the perpetrator, and left responsibility for the assault questionable. This author integrated another stigmatizing aspect that most researchers neglect, the impact of racialized reporting. This meant that black men were criminalized more often, while white men's accountability was reduced with excuses and justifications for their involvement (Pepin 2016).

Previous research has demonstrated how justifications and excuses are used by convicted rapists (Scully and Marolla 1984). During these accounts, Scully and Marolla (1984) introduce the process of neutralization: where perpetrators use their personal narratives to decriminalize their actions (Scott and Lyman 1968). Ultimately, they use socially accepted ways to phrase their perpetration of rape (Scully and Marolla 1984). Prior research has demonstrated that rape is not a criminal act in the eyes of rapists when understood from men's traditional position in society (Scully and Marolla 1984). During the interviews with convicted rapists, most perpetrators used stereotypes or stigmatizing images of promiscuous women to relieve themselves of blame and redirect that blame towards their victim (Scully and Marolla 1984). This deflection of responsibility runs deep; it is perpetuated by popular culture and reproduced by the public.

Hindes and Fileborn (2019:8) found that this neutralization is done in the media by using “language that consistently downplayed and minimized the nature of the encounter as something other than sexual violence” This can be seen in the ways that sexual assault is referred to but diminished as something less severe. Language like “took advantage” and “misread the mood” are used to replace acts of sexual violence and frame it as something other than criminal (Hindes and Fileborn 2019:8). Similar examples that Lamb (1991:251) found in academic journal articles include “the violence” as an assault descriptor. Not only does this type of writing reduce the severity of the problem, it does not link anyone to the crime and leaves responsibility for violence up to interpretation (Lamb 1991).

Pepin (2016) examined media presentations of sexual assault perpetrators and finds that overall, the media does not report the severity of the crime or include a consequence incurred by the perpetrator. A reporting of perpetrator consequences were lacking in so many articles that Pepin (2016:131) had to devise it into three subcategories that would code for a presence of “(1) Occupational Impact, (2) Generalized Accountability, and (3) Legal Consequences.” She also found that perpetrators lacked accountability when articles blamed the victim or neglected to mention consequences for the perpetrator (Pepin 2016). Linguistically, this creates issues for taking sexual assault seriously by failing to call out perpetrators, which ultimately fails to support survivors. At minimum, perpetrators should be held socially responsible by connecting them to the problem, so responsibility isn’t obscured. Without connecting the agent to the crime, accountability will never be widespread in the media (Lamb 1991).

Schur (1983) also studied male perpetrators of sexual assault. She coins the term “deviantize” as humankind’s inability to criminalize the behavior of men because of gender roles (Schur 1983). When society does not criminalize male behavior, it situates the responsibility as the fault of women (Schur 1983). This stigmatizing phenomenon is fostering the normalcy of victimizing women because severe criminal repercussions are unlikely. Historically, women’s victimization has not been addressed because of their position in society (Donovan 1994; Herman 1984; Schur 1983). If male perpetrators adhere to gender norms while victimizing women, then society will not see them as deviant (Schur 1983). It is only when stepping out of society’s widely cast net of acceptable behaviors that sexual victimization will be seen as deviant. This is why understanding the discourse surrounding accountability and the portrayals of sexual assault within media texts is so important.

#MeToo

A major source of our information and an influencer of cultural issues comes from digital media (Franiuk et al. 2008; Zaleski et al. 2016). Not only is the media very influential in shaping our understanding of criminal behavior, it reinforces harmful stereotypes (O’Hara 2012; Soothill 2004). If different media outlets are excusing criminal behavior, one may adapt these same attitudes to survivors of sexual violence in our personal lives. Rape myths, whether directly or indirectly used, sustain rape culture and create barriers for further progress against sexual assault (Mason and Monckton-Smith 2008). People gain an understanding of crime through the news, so the investigation of news content is important (Soothill 2004). The way media discusses and presents sexual

assault impacts the acceptability of rape myths within the cultural environment (Soothill 2004). Overall, the way different news organizations frame an issue is influential in how viewers understand social phenomenon. Evaluating media representations of sexual assault is critical to acknowledging injustices done to survivors.

How has the #MeToo movement challenged the climate of sexual assault in the media? The “‘Me Too’ movement work is a blend of grassroots organizing to interrupt sexual violence and digital community building to connect survivors to the needs of different communities” (MeToo 2020:NP). The #MeToo movement is known for its viral hashtag that took the world by storm in 2017 after an actress tweeted that she too was sexually assault by public figure, Harvey Weinstein. Women all around the world felt liberated to share their stories of sexual victimization with the hashtag “me too.” Having been birthed in 2006 by advocate Tarana Burke, she intended to address the lack of resources for sexual assault survivors like herself (MeToo 2020). She wanted to gather advocates that could help support women victimized by sexual assault. She stated that “we want perpetrators to be held accountable and we want strategies implemented to sustain long term, systemic change” (MeToo 2020:NP).

As the #MeToo movement is advocating accountability, everyone is unsure of the movements progress by asking questions like “Has #MeToo delivered?” (Dastagir 2019:NP). But by asking this question, the #MeToo movement has indeed infiltrated media platforms by gaining their attention and questioning the handling of sexual assault. My research investigates media discourse and language surrounding assault and accountability. I am interested if this push in accountability has seeped into news of

sexual assault. While we may not know yet if #MeToo has changed cultural discourse, there is some evidence in a shift of accountability and prosecution of sexual assault. The most obvious example is the conviction of a Hollywood producer, Harvey Weinstein, for his life-long pattern of sexually assaulting women in the film industry (Ransom 2020). This demonstrates some success in calling out even very successful and powerful men for their criminal behaviors, but can we assume that general consciousness raising is complete?

Similarly, #MeToo founder Tarana Burke addressed the importance of accountability when R. Kelly was found guilty of sexual assault. Burke states there "is a wave of accountability happen[ing] where corporations have stepped away from men, even if in the short term, to have authentic investigations into allegations" (Tsioulcas 2018:NP). While these two specific high-profile men have been publicly held accountable and prosecuted by the justice system, I ask if this "trend" has become pervasive in the way we see sexual assault, victims, perpetrators, and accountability depicted in media reports of sexual violence.

When it comes to reporting sexual assault, delayed reporting is especially pertinent to the #MeToo movement. There are many reasons survivors don't come forward and they need no explanation for waiting. However, if and when that person decides they want to hold their perpetrator legally accountable, the length of time between the assault and filing a police report can impact the victim-blaming accusers receive (von Sikorski and Saumer 2020). von Sikorski and Saumer (2020) wanted to know more about how this delayed reporting in the media impacted viewers desire to

enact victim-blaming. The authors found that when a survivor came forward with allegations from an assault in the past, viewers believe that the survivor had ulterior motives and resulted in more victim-blaming (von Sikorski and Saumer 2020). Some of these ulterior motives are portrayed in the way journalists frame articles about sexual assault, calling victims “whining” and “unforgiving” as if they are wanting revenge by coming forward with their victimization (Hindes and Fileborn 2019:11). Regardless of when a sexual assault happened, having the media call out perpetrators creates positive outcomes for current healing and future change.

This literature outlined the ways in which sexual assault has been negotiated throughout history and leaves us off in a time where there is the potential for significant change. Now that we are more educated on the misconceptions that survivors must navigate, it comes to the time to use this information to better understand the news. As described in my methodological approach in the following section, none of this literature was used to dictate what I found in my research. My literature reviews serves the purpose of framing the world of sexual assault for what is about to be a deep dive into that world.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Rates of sexual assault are high and accountability matters, which are the driving forces behind my investigation surrounding how sexual assault is being represented in the media during the #MeToo movement. More specifically, I want to know how sexual assault survivors and perpetrators are portrayed in the news by understanding the meaning of newspaper texts. By utilizing recent newspaper articles analyzed under grounded theory, my research on sexual assault in media texts contributes to a better understanding of how survivors and perpetrators are currently depicted in highly circulated newspapers.

Research Strategy

A content analysis can best answer the research question of how sexual assault is represented in the media. My research utilized a specific type of content analysis known as qualitative document analysis (Altheide 1996). This method reviews existing data, in this case, media articles referencing sexual victimization. As Altheide (1996:2) explains, “documents are studied to understand culture or the process and the array of objects, symbols, and meanings that make up social reality shared by members of a society.” Several studies have evaluated sexual assault in the media with the method of content analysis as well (Berns 2001; Bohmert et al. 2018; Franiuk et al. 2008; Giraldi and Monk-Turner 2017; Mason and Monckton-Smith 2008; Nigro et al. 2019; O’Hara 2012; Siefkes-Andrew and Alexopoulos 2019; Stubbs-Richardson et al. 2018; Zaleski et al. 2016).

By analyzing pre-existing newspaper articles from 2018-2020, I evaluate how sexual assault is currently portrayed. Given the sensitivity of sexual assault, capturing language surrounding victimization requires an approach that does not revictimize survivors. Data needed for a content analysis is readily available on the internet, costs nothing to access, and does not harm survivors. Obviously, not all sexual assaults are reported to authorities nor discussed in the media, which limits my analysis to how the incidents of sexual assault that appear newsworthy are framed.

This content analysis aims to analyze pre-existing media articles available through Nexis Uni and *The Wall Street Journal* ProQuest database. The same search terms and date limitations used in Nexis Uni, are used in the ProQuest database of *The Wall Street Journal*. Articles from Nexis Uni and ProQuest can be accessed for free through a student account with a university. They are digitized and available to be saved for later analysis, making them very accessible to conduct research.

Search terms of “rape” or “sexual assault” and “#MeToo” or “Me Too Movement” are required characteristics to be included my sample. These are the only terms that are required to be present in texts to qualify for analysis. Analysis was restricted to articles published between June 1, 2018 and June 1, 2020 to include the most current publications. Using purposive sampling to narrow down the sample size, filters were used to include only the highest circulation of newspapers in United States. These four major newspaper sources are *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today* (Cision Media Research 2019).

The political values of each newspaper source is important, as it could influence the representation of sexual assault against high profile perpetrators. Allsides (n.d.) provides political ideologies of over 800 news sources and categorically places them on the spectrum of democratic, leaning democratic, independent, leaning republican, and republican. Sources that are considered “leaning” democratic or republican are less polarized on the spectrum than a news source that is either democratic or republican. *The Wall Street Journal* varies between being an independent and republican leaning news source (Allsides n.d.). *The New York Times* leans democratic and is democratic in their news (Allsides n.d.). *The Washington Post* leans democratic and *USA Today* is known to be centrist in their news coverage (Allsides n.d.).

While having a variety of political values is important, these sources were included based on their high circulation. Using highly circulated newspapers was important to my research as I wanted to use information that is having the most reach for its audience. Republican or conservative leaning news sources are less digitally accessible as diagramed in Figure 1.0. These newspapers rank in order, starting with the most circulated print news media, *USA Today*. Behind *USA Today* in circulation is *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The New York Times* (Cision Media Research 2019). In this order, these newspapers rank the top 3 most circulated print media in the United States. Ranking the 6th most circulated news source is *The Washington Post* (Cision Media Research 2019). Unfortunately, the *New York Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* are not electronically available in a database for students. These two newspapers rank 4th and 5th

in circulation and could have contributed to the content analysis if accessible (Cision Media Research 2019).

Figure 1.0: Newspaper Sample Selection

Circulation	Source	Accessibility	Original Sample Size	Final Sample Size
#1	USA Today	Nexis Uni	75	25
#2	The Wall Street Journal	ProQuest	145	29
#3	The New York Times	Nexis Uni	1,247	124
#4	New York Post	N/A	N/A	N/A
#5	Los Angeles Times	N/A	N/A	N/A
#6	The Washington Post	Nexis Uni	340	68

A total of 1,807 articles published in *The New York Times* (1,247), *The Washington Post* (340), *The Wall Street Journal* (145), and *USA Today* (75) fit the sample criteria of date and search terms. The sample needed to be further reduced in order to feasibly analyze articles that met the criteria. My research utilized purposive sampling to narrow down the final sample. Each newspaper was sampled separately based on the ratio provided. Every newspaper included in analysis was sampled based on the number of articles present in the original sample of qualifying articles. Newspapers that have 500-1,000+ articles were sampled every 10th article, newspapers with 100-499 articles were sampled every 5th article, and newspapers with less than 99 articles were

sampled every 3rd article. When selecting articles in every 3rd, 5th, or 10th occurrence, they were ordered from oldest to newest publication.

Because of the large number of articles present in *The New York Times*, that source was sampled every 10th article. *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal* were sampled every 5th article based on the ratio provided. *USA Today* was sampled every 3rd article based on the small number of relevant articles in the original sample. All of four of these publications are considered daily publications, meaning they produce and publish content Monday-Friday and sometimes on the weekends. These ratios utilized reduced the sample size but keep representation of coverage. The final sample size included 246 articles; *The New York Times* (124), *The Washington Post* (68), *The Wall Street Journal* (29), and the *USA Today* (25).

Analysis plan

The analytic strategy of this content analysis is guided by grounded theory. Utilizing grounded theory allowed me to simultaneously collect data on newspaper articles and analyze it as I go. Grounded theory allows themes to emerge because there are no pre-existing codes (Charmaz 2014). Research that does not use grounded theory when performing a content analysis of media artifacts end up coding or searching for specific topics or terms instead of being open to a variety of ways content can be expressed. That deductive style of inquiry can cause researchers to miss codes that don't confirm their hypothesis. "In contrast, grounded theory is derived from data and then illustrated by characteristic examples of data" (Glaser and Strauss 1967:5). An

understanding of rhetoric analysis assisted the analyzing of data to gauge why and how words are used in context to give meaning. Words are powerful and without context to these words, meaning can become lost. That is why a content analysis paired with grounded theory was the best methodological approach to studying newspapers about sexual violence. Using grounded theory allowed the data to be more accurately represented for its content and not a predetermined set of terms or concepts.

When performing a content analysis of “extant documents” like newspaper articles, data is increasingly more objective (Charmaz 2014:48). This does not mean the content of these articles are facts, but social constructs should be valued as they inform and educate the public of social issues (Charmaz 2014). This is a useful analytic strategy to answer the representation of sexual assault because it allows the data to speak for itself. While previous research indicates rape culture indeed exists throughout popular culture, I want to take a look into its most recent portrayals in the news and see if anything has changed.

Initial coding of newspaper articles utilized line-by-line coding. Line-by-line coding is an in-depth approach to coding every line of data (Charmaz 2014). Coding can be done in a variety of ways to conceptualize and categorize words or phrases used in context. Starting with line-by-line coding allowed me to find gaps in data and prepare me for focused coding (Charmaz 2014). Focused coding was later be utilized to find emerging themes on the discourse used in newspaper articles. Focused coding relies on the initial codes that appear most often and allow researchers to work through larger data sets (Charmaz 2014). Coding works best when paired with memos. This allowed me to

reflect on what I have found thus far during the data collection process by comparing emerging themes (Charmaz 2014).

Analyzing newspaper articles with this unique method, paired with grounded theory, allows a truly inductive approach to studying content. The software package NVivo was used to code and collect data. NVivo provided me with the format to sort through codes better than a word processor could. This software is free as it is provided to students enrolled in the University. Investigating existing media articles on the representation of sexual victimization, can help to find how sexual assault in the era of the #MeToo movement is portrayed.

While my research cannot deduce the linkage between influence intended from journalists to the impact on participants, I can draw findings from understanding the rhetoric presented in my sample of newspapers. Journalists write with intention and that intention is to influence the thoughts and feelings of its audience (Selzer 2003). What I draw from my findings is ultimately the results of intentional influence to pursued readers on topics of sexual assault and #MeToo. The findings that were guided by this methodological approach are discussed further in my next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Table 2.0: [Publication Differences]

Circulation	Publication Source	Final Number of Newspaper Articles	Codes
#1	<i>USA Today</i>	25	70
#2	<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>	29	66
#3	<i>The New York Times</i>	122	74
#6	<i>The Washington Post</i>	68	74

With the sample selection process described in my methods section, I analyzed a total of 244 articles in *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post* that is visualized in Figure 2.0. During the sample selection of articles for each publication, two articles from within *The New York Times* were excluded as they were identical repeats of other articles included in the same publication. This happens when journalists collaborate on a piece with another author and republish an article almost exactly identical to the one published earlier. I developed a total of seventy-nine codes from my analysis, with not all seventy-nine applying to each publication. References are how many numerical times a code was used, and I draw my findings from those codes and theoretical memos surrounding the major themes uncovered during analysis. None of the quotes I use to exemplify findings have been edited in any way—when I present them and quotation marks are used, I am indicating that the journalist is quoting someone verses when they are stating something themselves.

As analysis was guided by grounded theory, codes were not preselected as that would restrict the findings available in such a large data set. Studying the news presents a multitude of opportunities to study content, and my analysis is restricted to the following findings related to the #MeToo movement, survivor and perpetrator portrayals, and accountability. While the type of codes varied between publications, the trends discussed below refer collectively to all of the media outlets and publications within my sample, unless stated otherwise. This is important as it highlights the fluidity of these findings across multiple platforms regardless of political ideology. I first discuss the findings surrounding #MeToo and then focus on portrayals of victims, followed by the portrayal of perpetrators, and end with the ways that accountability was discussed within newspapers.

#MeToo

While #MeToo was referenced in every article, discussion of #MeToo was often simple with very few references in each article. Only a handful of journalists discussed #MeToo as the sole purpose of their article. For the remainder of my thesis, references of #MeToo are reduced to #MT to conserve space. My results ended with ten codes that included Accountability Before #MT (16), Achievements of #MT (168), Answer to #MT (43), Inconvenience of #MT (67), Mocking #MT (6), #MT Miss the Mark (27), #MT Name Drop (64), #MT Struggles (15), #MT Support (29), and Questioning the Success of #MT (54). These codes are grouped together as they contribute to similar findings of either positive, negative, constructive, or general reference towards #MT. I start by discussing instances where #MT was framed in positive ways. Next, I consider how

critical references of #MT are composed to illustrate a negative image of the movement. Then, I present how constructive criticisms of #MT go further than to outline the failures, but offer opportunities for improvement. Lastly, I consider three types of references to #MT as working towards generic mentions of the movement.

#MeToo as Positive

I found support for #MT when journalists would reference achievements of the movement or their general support. Out of all 489 times that I found #MT was referenced, almost 200 of those references were positive findings. Achievements of #MT was a significant finding of mine in that it was by far the most referenced topic overall when #MT was mentioned. I also found, in addition to linking #MT with its achievements, outright support for the movement was carried out with brief positive mentions. This was not as common as the correlation between the movement and its successes, but when I lump them together, the numerical count of all positive #MT references, it is the most referenced code that I developed. Below, I offer examples of *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* to highlight the achievements linked to #MT and *USA Today* to signify how positive references of #MT are used.

But this time the battle takes place in a different era, at a moment when the #MT movement has brought down many powerful men over accusations of sexual misconduct that were once swept under the rug.

- *The New York Times* 2018

Authorities have attributed the increase in reporting to the #MT movement.

- *The Wall Street Journal* 2019

Those encouraged to share their #MT experiences, Burke says, are "going to crisis hotlines, into churches, and those programs need resources."

- *USA Today* 2018

I found that when positive attributes of #MT were referenced, discussion often centered on ways in which accountability has increased. This is exemplified in *The New York Times* as journalists highlight this positive transition from sweeping allegations under the rug, to holding them accountable. There was also an overwhelming amount of causation attributed to the #MT movement for creating such achievements for survivors. For example, the second quote found in *The Wall Street Journal* links the movement to a change in reporting. General positive comments about #MT include advocacy-like statements, like the one above in *USA Today*. While both listing the achievements of the movement and advocating for the movement display #MT positively, one does so by directly correlating successes to #MT, versus just saying a supportive statement with #MT in the content.

#MeToo as Negative

While the bulk of the references to #MT were positive, there was also a significant amount of content that attached negative attributes to the #MT movement. Critical comments, almost always negative, include references to the movement as inconvenient, trivial, and unnecessary. The following quote by a journalist in *The New York Times* serves to mock the integrity of the #MT movement with jokes.

I'm starting the #MeThree movement

- *The New York Times* 2019

The GOP senators who spoke outside the room obviously felt they had been mowed down by a #MT freight train.

- *USA Today* 2018

Republicans have already created more danger for themselves and Judge Kavanaugh by agreeing to a hearing that Democrats will turn into a #MT spectacle.

- *The Wall Street Journal* 2018

I found that those critical of the #MT movement sometimes used mocking language, as illustrated above in *The New York Times*, but such instances were rare within my sample. Most frequently, I found that when #MT was discussed in negative ways, it was characterized as inconvenient. This was accomplished by saying the #MT movement caused suffering with its ulterior motives of “reckoning” and “weaponization” in the lives of many, especially men. The previous quote found in *USA Today* provides an example of how destruction was associated with the #MT movement. Another common theme was criticizing #MT by suggesting that advocates have ulterior motives, as exemplified in the latter quote in *The Wall Street Journal* which suggests advocates are trying to create a public “spectacle.” By labeling increased calls for accountability as inconvenient, news coverage indicates to survivors and the overall audience that women’s claims of abuse may still not be taken seriously. These critical, yet negative comments about #MT were referenced seventy-three times, making it the smallest category of findings associated with the #MT movement.

Constructive Criticisms of #MeToo

I found that references to #MT’s success, pitfalls, and struggles followed the rhetoric of constructive criticism by highlighting the ways that the movement could

improve. These are not overtly negative comments bashing the #MT movement; rather, they question the utility and success of the #MT movement in a change-making capacity. Codes that illustrated these themes totaled ninety-five references, and was the third most referenced category regarding the movement overall. The following quotes from *USA Today* and *The New York Times* highlight how the questioning of #MT successes occurs in newspapers.

Has #MT delivered?

- *USA Today* 2019

Whether Mr. Akbar's fall sets off a wider reckoning within the country's political class will largely determine whether India's #MT movement leads to lasting change in the country.

- *The New York Times* 2018

When being constructive of #MT, I found that questioning the success of #MT was referenced the most often. Most of the time, journalists would not offer their own views about whether or not #MT has been successful, but instead would illustrate both successes and failures of the movement, inviting the reader to draw their own conclusions. My data shows that often this was accomplished by simply presenting the successes not a statement of fact like the last reference in *The New York Times*—but where the political landscape is described as undetermined or yet to be seen. This type of language may leave the reader wondering if #MT has accomplished or will eventually accomplish such tasks.

I also found language that highlighted the pitfalls of #MT, questioning if the movement would be able to accomplish the goals it set out to achieve. I found these

references to be more constructive in identifying ways in which the #MT movement had short falls like the following quote in *The Washington Post*. This quote specifically tackles how race was one of the ways #MT missed the mark on support for all survivors.

At a 2017 conference on reparations, in the midst of the #MT movement, a group of black women said they did not want it forgotten that generations of black women had been subjected to rape and bred for more than 250 years

- *The Washington Post* 2019

Why do you think the music industry hasn't had the same degree of #MT reckoning that the film business has?

- *The New York Times* 2019

Not all twenty-seven references of #MT's shortcomings were all about racial pitfalls, as some included general failures that #MT couldn't adapt to the music industry like the previous quote in *The New York Times*. Overall, these references demonstrate that what I have found on #MT's shortcomings, does a good job identifying areas that the movement could benefit from adapting across all social institutions.

The last reoccurring theme in the category of constructivism surrounding #MT was the struggles that advocates for the movement have faced. The following references found in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* exemplify the struggle advocates of #MT go through.

The [Chinese] government has clamped down on discussion of gender issues like the #MT movement because of its distrust of independent social movements. Officials banned the #MT hashtag last year.

- *The New York Times* 2019

'It's all I've ever known,' he will say of coaching football, and like many previously powerful men disgraced during the #MeToo era, Briles refuses to go away.

- *The Washington Post* 2019

References to the movements struggles was found fifteen times, only within these two publications, meaning it was not as pervasive as other findings. The previous quote in *The New York Times* highlights the struggle that advocates for #MT have gone through in China. The statement found in *The Washington Post* provides more fruitful analysis as there is reference to men suffering from disgrace when there is increased accountability, but by saying that “Briles refuses to go away,” the journalist identifies that the movement struggles to fully achieve accountability. While overall this journalist in *The Washington Post* took the stance of annoyance that this coach Briles refused to be held accountable, using language that refers to #MT as the cause of men’s suffering, neglects to directly connect perpetration to accountability and instead links #MT with suffering. References like these show that while #MT has permeated our language; journalists will not neglect to identify aspects of #MT that have failed to adapt but they should be wary of tainting the reputation of #MT in their rhetoric.

#MeToo as a Generic Reference

Additional findings include when the hashtag or movement was referenced by either using #MT without further explanation, refer to accountability that took place before the movement, or how the public is expected to answer to the movement. While these findings do not work together to convey positive or negative references of the #MT movement, they are similar in their contribution as a reference. Sometimes #MT is

referenced because its absence when discussing topics of sexual violence would seem culturally out-of-touch. With name dropping constituting half of the references for this category, it is important to note that sometimes the discussion of sexual violence prompts the name dropping of #MT. This often does not include an articulated discussion, but a one-time reference in the article like the following in *The New York Times*.

Ms. Burke, the founder of the #MT movement.

- *The New York Times* 2018

Even before #MT took hold

- *USA Today* 2018

But this is high school in the age of the #MT movement, of hashtags about body positivity and campaigns against “slut shaming.”

- *The Washington Post* 2019

This example of name dropping in *The New York Times* provides context yet does not add to conversation in a way that the other category of findings did. The accountability that took place before #MT was often constructed by starting a sentence with “Before #MeToo” followed by previous attempts for accountability, which is exemplified in the above quote found in *USA Today*. These statements function to give historical relevance to #MT when talking about accountability surrounding sexual assault. Statements related to the expectation that the public was to answer to #MT included content that highlighted the way that people have had to alter their actions or beliefs to adhere to the movement. This signified the change-making capacity of #MT, without discussion of positive or negative impacts. The above quote found in *The Washington Post* highlights how people and social institutions feel pressure to address

changing concerns about the handling of sexual assault. Using #MT as a generic reference proved to be a significant finding as it indicates the movement's submersion into our culture as a powerful movement.

While negative references to the #MT movement constituted the minority of content surrounding #MT, it is important to recognize the potency of the rhetoric against the movement. Negative discussion of #MT does not offer opportunities for improvement and can even seek to shut down efforts to end sexual violence together. By giving the audience rhetoric that refocuses #MT as negative, with no chance to advance the failed portions of the movement, could alter the way readers understand the goal to end sexual assault. Using #MT to suggest its inconvenience supports the initiative of perpetrators and those that want to silence survivors. While positive references of #MT was the most referenced category, I think the most significant finding was those references to constructive criticisms of #MT because of what it offers for future change. The following quote in *USA Today* signifies why I find that this category provides the most opportunities to insight change.

When #MT entered the national consciousness, there were questions about whom the movement was really for. Headlines were largely dominated by stories of white, wealthy, straight, cisgender women, even though rates of sexual violence are disproportionately higher for poor women, women of color and LGBTQ people.

- *USA Today* 2019

Statements that are constructive of the #MT movement provide opportunities to raise the consciousness of readers that no other category does because it offers the reader to think in way that isn't as simple as a 'good' or 'bad' characterization of the movement.

This kind of rhetoric invites critical thought about whose problems are considered ‘worthy’ of concern and suggests that inclusivity is important in addressing sexual assault. What I have found from these references offers great insight into the use of #MT in the news as it progresses throughout time.

Victim-Survivor Portrayals

When it comes to the data I found on survivor portrayals, I would best categorize my findings based on a spectrum varying in support, as seen in Figure 3.0 *Spectrum of Supportiveness*. I use the terms victim and survivor interchangeably as my data and literature did not adhere to the use of one over the other. The discussion of survivors often is coupled with the discussion of perpetrators. For the purposes of analysis, I address the portrayals of perpetrators separately in the following section in order to explore the ways survivors were discussed in detail.

In my sample, there was a wide variety of findings related to the discussion of victims in the news. I organized this section starting with the portrayals of victims on the left end of the spectrum, also known as the most embracing of survivors. Then I discuss the most harmful findings on the right end of spectrum. These are the most detrimental to survivors as they include stereotypes and victim-blaming.

Figure 3.0 [Spectrum of Supportiveness]

Most Supportive ----- Most Harmful

Supportive Statements

During coding and analysis, I discovered the following categories of information related to victim and survivor portrayals. Identifying the Harmful (219), Identifying Gender Inequality (235), Victim Support (140), Cyclical Victim Support (40), Consequences of Reporting (100), Consequences of Surviving (131), Educate Reader (75), and Women Empowerment (110). I present my findings on victim and survival portrayals below by first focusing on the misconceptions that journalists identify. I then turn to how exposing gender inequality tells the audience the correlation between patriarchy and sexual violence. Next I identify rhetoric that provides victims with unconditional support. I then discuss the various consequences survivors endure as the result of reporting and being traumatized. I end with how some rhetoric would bolster survivors by either supporting them with outside information or statements of empowerment.

Misconceptions

I found that when journalists reference harmful stereotypes of sexual assault, it exposes misconceptions that often plague our ability to understand sexual assault in a way that supports the victim. With being the sixth most referenced code across all sections and categories, statements like the following in *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* signify a breaking down of stereotypes.

In most cases, the perpetrator is someone the victim knows--a friend or someone who walks the same halls at school.

- *The Wall Street Journal* 2018

Earlier on Friday, Dr. Barbara Ziv, a forensic psychiatrist who provided expert testimony in Mr. Cosby's second trial, explained to jurors in the Weinstein case why a woman might remain in contact with her attacker after an assault.

- *The New York Times* 2020

Content like this is huge in breaking down stereotypes as this is one way that journalists can combat rape culture. By directly countering stereotypes, rhetoric can give readers insight into what survivors experience. This can make survivors reactions to victimization more validated when stereotypes are exposed as false. With one in three women being a survivor of some type of sexual violence, most newspaper readers know or unknowingly interact with survivors every day. When a journalist identifies stereotypes as problematic, it helps so many people in understanding the culture in which survivors have lived in for so long.

Gender Inequality

I found that references to gender inequalities are supportive to the portrayals of survivors in that journalists are either subtly or adamantly connecting those gender inequalities to the sexual victimization of women. The rhetoric used by journalists mostly presents the ways in which gender inequality exists in the workplace, with some references to how everyday life is impacted by this inequality. In general, all of these references discuss how gender negatively impacts women and advantages men in toxic ways. The following examples found in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* described the negative side effects women experience due to perceived gender differences.

At the same time, some women have said that routine exposure to sexist workplace behavior caused them to leave the business.

- *The New York Times* 2019

These conversations are made murkier by the pressures teenage girls face to look a certain way on Instagram and other social media platforms, which often encourage them to seek validation through likes and comments.

- *The Washington Post* 2019

The journalist from *The Washington Post* highlights the consequences of gendered expectations as toxic on identity of young girls. Most often though, the reference found in *The New York Times* is how gender inequality resulted in sexist workplaces. I found this content to be supportive to victim-survivors as it works to dismantle gender inequalities. When journalists use rhetoric that acknowledges patriarchy and sexual violence as interconnected, they are offering the audience and survivors the language to deconstruct the myriad of social expectations that women have to navigate, including those related to sexual assault.

Support for Victims

I found that supportive comments towards victims, that don't include notions of victim-blaming or victim-responsibility, base the portrayals of survivors as championed by advocates. This includes references that offer unconditional support which bolsters survivor narratives by taking them at face value. Examples of this victim supportiveness rhetoric are exemplified in the following quotes found in *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal*.

That means the first thing we owe the women who come forward is an opportunity to tell their own stories, their own ways.

- *The Washington Post* 2019

"Every person--man or woman--who makes a charge of sexual assault deserves to be heard and treated with respect," Ms. Collins said on the Senate floor Friday as Judge Kavanaugh's confirmation crossed the 50-vote threshold.

- *The Wall Street Journal* 2018

The previous quotes highlight my findings on victim support from various publications as unconditional. Not all statements that intended to support survivors were unconditional, as those are described in the next section on the most harmful to survivors. Giving survivors an opportunity to hear this kind of rhetoric may enable them to cope with their victimization better. Additionally, cyclical support is support that comes from other survivors when topics of sexual assault arise. References to this type of support highlights the ways in which support can be given as it builds on shared experiences. The following quote is an example found in *The New York Times* on how victim support can be viewed as a cyclical process.

Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota, another red state Democrat, understood the symbolism of the moment. When she listened to Christine Blasey Ford testify, Heitkamp said, "I heard the voices of women I have known throughout my life who have similar stories of sexual assault and abuse."

- *The New York Times* 2018

Even though I did not find references to cyclical victim support to occur as often as references to victim support, it is important to highlight the storytelling that bonds survivors together. References like these demonstrate that support within media representation comes not only from journalists or news outlets, but can be from citizens who are concerned about women's rights and victimization.

Consequences

My coding and analysis of the data uncovered over 200 references on the consequences of reporting a sexual assault or surviving one. This rhetoric does less to combat stereotypes and does more on identifying suffering as a result of either reporting sexual assault or experiencing trauma. The consequences of reporting is important as journalists recognize the backlash women face after they report sexual victimization. What I found represents secondary victimization as a direct result from taking action against a perpetrator. The references indicate that I found two types of statements which are either scholars identifying the consequences that come from survivors reporting or either survivors explaining the consequences they experienced. The scholarly statements used to highlight reporting consequences is exemplified in *The Wall Street Journal*.

What factors influence whether a person reports the assault? The decision is complex. Reporting can be re-traumatizing, empowering, or both. Part of healing is regaining a sense of control after having lost it in the assault. But when someone makes a report, they lose control again when systems take over.

- *The Wall Street Journal* 2018

I told her to go to the police, and she said: “I can’t. He will destroy me. He will destroy my career.”

- *The New York Times* 2020

Rhetoric on suffering that comes from a scholarly individual is not only informational but important for viewers to realize the harm that results when survivors “go public” with their stories. The second type of consequence, in which survivors themselves describe the negative side effects they endured from reporting, is exemplified in the quote above in *The New York Times*. Survivors know the consequences they may

be subjected to when telling their stories. Statements that recognize the consequences of reporting may persuade viewers to sympathize with survivors as they are put in an impossible situation when experiencing backlash. There were 100 references to statements similar to the previous quotes, meaning that the discussion surrounding the consequences survivors endure from reporting occurred often.

There were 130 references to the consequences survivors' experience as the aftermath of being sexually assaulted, regardless of reporting the assault or not. These statements are important; they reinforce the idea that victim statements illustrate a crime perpetrated against the victim and not as something they 'imagined' or blew out of proportion. When these statements are a common part of media discourse surrounding sexual assault, they illustrate that women and their claims are taken seriously. Discussion of this aftermath was similar to that found in side effects of reporting, in that it was either accounts from survivors on their trauma or specialists educating readers on the experiences that result from surviving a sexual assault. An example of this from an educational standpoint is the following quote in *The Wall Street Journal*.

People who have been victimized may not want to relive the trauma by having to talk about it publicly. The circumstances of the assault can also make a difference. If there is evidence of physical injuries, the person may be more likely to report. If they were intoxicated at the time and have a foggy memory of some details, they may be afraid they won't be believed.

- *The Wall Street Journal* 2018

I am forced to carry that experience until I die. It is a recurring nightmare that I feel is just as real as when it happened.

- *USA Today* 2020

Another example that highlights trauma survivors' experiences and the pain that comes with victimization is illustrated in the previous code found in *USA Today*. I think that these findings have the potential to raise consciousness and/or sympathy in readers who otherwise may not know the negative side-effects of being sexual victimized. I suggest that statements like these also have the potential to support survivors who experience long term trauma from assault by affirming their struggle and acknowledging that many women continue to reckon with the effects of violence long after the incident. This rhetoric by journalists identifies the suffering that survivors experience as a result of someone else's actions against them, which is supportive in that discussion is focused on survivors as the victims. These references bolster support for survivors as it highlights the suffering that is endured after the initial sexual assault occurs. Acknowledging these may further educate the public, aide in sympathy that is unconditional, and support survivors after victimization.

Represent Survivors

I found support for survivors when journalists would use statements of facts related to research to enhance the credibility of their reporting. This approach attempts to educate readers as all references include some sort of outside resource surrounding topics of sexual violence. An example of these findings were located in *The Washington Post* which describe the use of facts in supporting survivors.

The data also show that only 0.06 percent of the perpetrators are incarcerated. Using data from the Justice Department's National Crime Victimization Survey, that means that an average of 321,500 people are the victims of rape and sexual assault in the United States annually but only 1,900 are incarcerated.

- *The Washington Post* 2018

Educating the reader is important when talking about victimology as it supports the remaining content as valid and reliable. This finding is significant as viewers may be more likely to believe content that is supported by statements of fact as it presents itself as evidence-based. I found seventy-five references that include statements of fact, which indicates that journalists feel the need to use supportive data when distributing information about sexual assault.

The supportive portrayal of survivors was signified when statements by journalists would use empowering rhetoric for survivors of sexual assault. References of empowerment occurred when journalists described the supporting of women victims as powerful individuals who will survive beyond what happened to them. Empowerment has been criticized in previous studies as it forces women into a position in which they are expected to be resilient and those who do not overcome traumatizing experiences are possibly viewed as less than for not embodying empowerment. For the purposes of this research, empowerment is categorized as supporting survivors, as the assuming goal of journalists was to boost victimized voices.

I'll be amplifying the voices of women who have been abused in our prison system.

- *The Washington Post* 2019

I'm far from the only one he's done this to, I refuse to be silent anymore.

- *The New York Times* 2018

The previous quotes in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* are provided to exemplify the style of women empowerment found in my research. These references support my finding that empowerment was used to generate a comradery of resilience among women as supportive. While content surrounding empowerment provides the opportunity to shame survivors who don't embody empowering ideologies, this shaming did not occur in my data but rather spoke positively of women overcoming difficult experiences.

Most Harmful Statements

The following codes that I developed and detected guide my discussion on the most harmful portrayals of victims: Attention Seeking (77), Inconvenience of Sexual Assault (54), She's Lying (21), Victim-Blaming (22), Question Legitimacy (218), and Victim Responsibility (215). While some statements were used to combat stereotypes and other harmful information, journalists can do just the opposite and weaponize stereotypes against survivors. Describing the portrayal of victims can be done in ways that never mentions the victim, and portraying perpetrators positively can accomplish harming survivors.

In the following section I focus on the ways that survivors were portrayed as damaging to a survivors image by A. as an annoyance, B. the potential for women's ulterior motives, C. creating doubt in victim's stories, and D. expectations of survivors who share their experiences. I start with references to survivors as annoying to others because of the investigation that results from survivors reporting. I then discuss how

women are viewed as deceptive because of the potential for ulterior motives. Then I negotiate how survivors unconfirmed accounts place doubt in the audiences mind. Lastly, I focus on references that indicate how women should know how to practice victimhood better because there are expectations of how to act from the time of being assaulted to recovering from it. I discuss the portrayals of perpetrators later in the paper as this section focuses on survivors representation.

Survivors as Annoying

References to survivors as attention-seeking for coming forward with claims of sexual assault implied that survivors had ulterior motives. Examples of these ulterior motives are presented below—discourse from *The New York Times* and *USA Today* indicated that survivors are using claims of sexual assault to destroy innocent men.

“I just think there’s a lot of shouting going on at the moment, dressed up as freedom of the press and it’s all to do with personal agendas, attention seeking, personal dislike of ugly, fat businessmen.”

- *The New York Times* 2018

This is not trivial, and not as simple as 'activists' versus Weinstein, and the only issues that should be relevant beginning Monday are those involved with the criminal charges.

- *USA Today* 2020

Both references found in *The New York Times* and *USA Today* describe the situation of women coming forward with claims of sexual assault as annoying to previous agendas. The specific language used often conveyed that women coming forward with sexual assault allegations were just trying to create a circus of commotion. I suggest that

content and phrasing like this is harmful to survivors as it deters others from telling their stories when some survivors are described as attention seekers.

During analysis I found references to sexual assault being discussed as a topic of inconvenience, presenting survivors as problematic when they share their experience. With fifty-four references, rhetoric surrounded either political agendas being slowed down, or problems being created that these people didn't want to deal with. This is exemplified in the following quotes in *The Washington Post* and *USA Today* as these journalists highlight the suffering that others experience as a result of survivors coming forward.

The White House on Sunday stood by Brett M. Kavanaugh after a woman publicly accused him of sexual assault decades ago, an allegation that triggered the most concrete signs yet of Republican resistance to President Trump's Supreme Court nominee.

- *The Washington Post* 2018

The scandals and controversies are only worsened by our moment of cultural reckoning spawned by the allegations of sexual harassment and assault against Harvey Weinstein 10 months ago.

- *USA Today* 2018

When journalists use negative words like scandals, controversies, and political resistance when talking about survivors coming forward, they are represented as bothersome. I argue that statements like these are harmful to survivors as they reduce the credibility of all women who claim victimization, and instead refocus or center the inconveniencing of others. These connotations suggest that sexual assault is a hassle for those involved, and they paint challenges to men's power as an annoyance that men experience, rather than offering empathy to victims.

Deceptive Women

While most of the rhetoric was not strongly phrased against victims, it is significant that I found twenty-one instances referring to survivors as “liars.” This rhetoric takes a bold stance by journalists passing along the characterization used by others that they believe a victim is lying in the most direct form. Other references include more indirect blaming techniques as it still can appease a diverse range of viewers, without offending someone too badly. The terminology of this language included the portrayal that these survivors are liars, phonies, money-driven, or used as a smear campaign. This can be highlighted in the way that journalists in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today* portrayed victims in their news articles.

and is "a smear, plain and simple."

- *The Wall Street Journal* 2018

The second legal team was more aggressive, depicting Ms. Constand as a calculating “con artist” and the other accusers as money-driven.

- *The New York Times* 2018

At any rate, my inbox was full of readers who believed they had identified the true epidemic: lying women.

- *USA Today* 2019

Calling allegations, a “smear-campaign” takes the implying of ulterior motives found in previous rhetoric, one step further by proclaiming them as liars. There is a difference between implying a survivor is lying and saying a survivor is lying; one is indirect in letting the reader decide what to believe and the other does it for them. As one can infer, findings like these are harmful to survivors as it provides a megaphone for

perpetrators to call survivors liars. I found that for consumers, statements like these do not remove the stigma that surrounds the sharing of sexual victimization and for survivors it reinforces the victim-blaming they are subjected to.

References that blame survivors for their sexual victimization is accomplished with statements that critique either their story of events or how they subjected themselves to violation. While calling survivors liars denies victimization, victim-blaming says yes it did happen, but criticizes survivors for their involvement. An example of this critiquing is highlighted in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*.

A Chicago news anchor implied on air that Bialek was the aggressor in her encounter with Cain and insinuated that she had a history of promiscuity.

- *The Washington Post* 2019

The stridently conservative and deliberately provocative Italian newspaper *Libero*, for instance, had followed her accusations against Mr. Weinstein with an article that suggested, “First they give it away, then they whine and pretend to regret it.”

- *The New York Times* 2018

To acknowledge abuse that is paired with implicit criticism is victim-blaming in its most overt form. The more indirect forms, questioning legitimacy and victim responsibility, were found significantly more often and are discussed in the next section of my findings. My assumption is that to directly blame a victim for their assault is too taboo and would result in backlash.

Unconfirmed Accounts

I found support for the harmful portrayal of survivors from statements that questioned the legitimacy of a survivors story. With these references, there is rhetoric that places doubt on the validity of survivors stories in subliminal ways. Often this content referenced how old allegations were, places doubt on likelihood to incriminate alleged perpetrators, and the failure for women to support their claims.

Once the decades-old accusations had been made against Judge Kavanaugh, with no corroboration available or likely.

- *The Wall Street Journal* 2018

"The case had serious proof issues," Ms. Friedman-Agnifilo said. "It was not a slam-dunk case."

- *The New York Times* 2019

Of course, in a "he said, she said" scenario, having such an agreement could perhaps in a criminal case provide some "reasonable doubt."

- *USA Today* 2018

The previous quote in *The Wall Street Journal* highlights how allegations that are made from years prior are criticized and questioned as invalid. The above quote in *The New York Times* questions the qualities of a victims experience as not valid-enough to criminalize. When using phrases like "he said, she said" described in the previous quote in *USA Today*, it represents how a journalist can place that doubt in the mind of their consumers. These references contribute to findings that indirectly blames victims, as it places doubt on them and makes the reader question how legitimate their claims really are. With the quantity of being referenced over 200 times, it is one of the two most harmful ways that rhetoric on topics of sexual assault subtly criticizes survivors.

Expectations of Victimhood

I found statements that indicated what can be found as a “good” or “bad” victim as overall a victims responsibility to control. Just like the latter references of subtle doubt, statements that subtly uses stereotypes and misconceptions put responsibility on the survivors behalf to do everything right. References varied by their use in three different ways which are how victims are naturally expected to fight off their perpetrator, produce evidence to support claims, and behave like a “good” victim. The following quotes from journalists in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today* exemplify how statements like these work to create an ideology of “good” and “bad” victims.

Then, when she tried to scream for help, she claims he put his hand over her mouth to silence her.

- *The Washington Post* 2018

None of them reported the attacks to the police at the time, and there is little physical or forensic evidence to support their claims, beyond photographs of the defendant that are being used to corroborate their descriptions of his body.

- *The New York Times* 2020

Ford was clear-eyed and aiming to please in response to questions from all sides. She was fully human and seemingly ingenuous. She was not angry or overwrought. She was nervous -- "terrified" in her words -- but determined. She was moved to the point of tears when senators offered testaments to her courage. She was, more than anything, completely resolute on the key detail that her attacker was Kavanaugh.

- *USA Today* 2018

The quote in *The Washington Post* provides an example of how it is a victims responsibility to show physical resistance to sexual assault. The responsibility for “good” victims to produce corroborating evidence was also contested by journalists like the

above quote in *The New York Times*. A “good” victim also behaves sad yet strong enough to sound credible. An example that highlights how credibility is earned by survivors behavioral expectations is characterized in the long quote above when a journalist from *USA Today* negotiates the demeanor of Dr. Ford. So, while journalists highlight what “good” victims do, victims who do not follow this script will automatically be labeled as a “bad” victim. Victims even used this language in their own description of events, highlighting how they tried to fight him off but couldn’t or that he muffled her screams because that’s what “good” victims do, fight and scream. Overall, I found it is a “good” victims responsibility to be credible or risk being criticized as a “bad” victim.

Perpetrator Portrayals

The following codes guide my discussion on the portrayal of perpetrators: Claiming Unfair Justice (172), Denying Violence (144), Personal Achievements (134), Men’s Suffering (132), Perpetrator Support (30), and Justifying Violence (1). All of the portrayals of perpetrators in this section are harmful to survivors as any forms of accountability, which support survivors, are addressed in my next section *Accountability*. A discussion of a perpetrator is automatically a discussion of a survivor because one does not exist without the other. Overall, my findings are ordered by the various tactics used to portray perpetrators which works to either A. portray perpetrators as the victim, B. ignore violence all together and focus on the good qualities of perpetrators, or C. indicate perpetrators are not responsible for the alleged sex crimes.

Perpetrator as Victim

I found references to perpetrators response to sexual assault would sometimes result in claiming unfair justice and highlighting men's suffering. My coding process revealed that claiming unfair justice was referenced more often than men's suffering, but coupled together this compiled the most referenced category. References to claiming unfairness signifies how perpetrators or others would respond to allegations of sexual assault for a crime they deny committing. This shifts the conversation, as perpetrators are portrayed as the ones suffering from injustice. I found that statements varied by either getting an unfair trial or jury, the unfairness for persecuting old crimes, or how hostile it is to be a perpetrator of sexual assault in a time period of change. Examples of these qualities are justified below from journalists in *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*.

“How can a person fairly defend himself against decade-old accusations, especially when no timely and thorough investigation was conducted?” said Allen Wolf, one of the attorneys.

- *The Washington Post* 2019

a common refrain emerged underscoring their challenge: Over 90% of potential jurors had already heard about the case.

- *The Wall Street Journal* 2018

Today, in the #MT moment, there is more of a presumption that women who come forward with accusations should be given the benefit of the doubt, which worries Judge Kavanaugh's friends who say he may be smeared unfairly.

- *The New York Times* 2018

The reference in *The Washington Post* highlights how I found delayed reporting or persecution insinuates that perpetrators are on the wrong end of justice as crimes

committed in the past should be left in the past. This statement does not deny victimization, but how “fairly” a perpetrator could defend themselves from an allegation that seemingly arose out of the blue. The statement by a journalist in *The Wall Street Journal* insinuates that they cannot get a fair trial because the career of the person who is being held accountable brings too much unfairness. The last quote in *The New York Times* references how #MT is a time period of accountability increase which negatively impacts alleged perpetrators to unfair justice.

When journalists would reference men’s suffering in the context of sexual assault, it highlights the consequences perpetrators experience from sexual violence allegations. This content is not describing the situation as unfair or illegal like described previously but how perpetrators suffer from allegations and/or conviction as well as victims. Just like my previous findings on unfairness, references like these also refocuses the suffering that perpetrators experienced rather than their victims suffering. Topics of job loss and personal reputation being ruined occupied much of the suffering referenced.

In the three years since, Briles has been unemployable ‘at least in the United States’ with everyone on his former staff stained.

- *The Washington Post* 2019

Mr. Hockenberry wrote a 7,000-word piece titled “*Exile*” in Harper’s Magazine this month, ruing his continued banishment and shaming. “For almost a year I have lived as a pariah facing cold silence or open hostility in public,” he wrote. “I have watched presumed friends vanish. I have listened to colleagues, lawyers, and P.R. professionals tell me that I am unemployable.”

- *The New York Times* 2018

Christine Blasey Ford's testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee has left Judge Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court nomination on life support. From the moment she started to speak, this was a bloodbath for Kavanaugh, the White House and the 11 Republican members of the committee.

- *USA Today* 2018

The above quotes drawn from in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today* illustrate the portrayal of perpetrators as sufferers. With references to unemployment and a failed career being the most common type of suffering, a portion of the quote in *The New York Times* highlights the social stigma derived from being a known perpetrator. Overall, my findings indicate this rhetoric journalists use to shift the conversation from victims suffering to perpetrators suffering negatively impacts survivors.

Perpetrator as Prodigy

I found that perpetrators were sometimes portrayed by identifying their achievements with either a short introduction of what they are known for or a lengthy description of their success. References would usually focus on the good qualities of perpetrators lives which I found takes away from true accountability. With the following types of statements being reference 134 times, I found that this was a common kind of rhetorical tactic used when discussing cases of sexual assault.

the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Junot Díaz

- *The New York Times* 2018

Mr. Weinstein, the 67-year-old producer of Oscar-winning films like “Pulp Fiction” and “Shakespeare in Love.”

- *The Wall Street Journal* 2020

Putting the 53-year-old Brett Kavanaugh on the nation's highest court, replacing the justice who has been the swing vote between the court's liberal and conservative wings, could have an ideological impact for decades.

- *USA Today* 2018

The above example in *The New York Times* highlights the short introduction given to perpetrators as it was the most common way perpetrators personal achievements were displayed. The second quote in *The Wall Street Journal* was also a longer version yet a less occurring finding of how perpetrators achievements were portrayed. The last example in *USA Today* illustrates a longer description of a perpetrators personal achievements, but this was not usually common. I found that referencing the achievements of perpetrators serves to portray the good things that they've done and subtly make the credibility of the crime less believable or gruesome.

There were statements included by journalists that provided support for perpetrators by naming their good personal qualities. This was limited in quantity of references as outright support for perpetrators could be considered too taboo than other methods of support. This finding is similar to that of the direct forms of victim-blaming in survivor portrayals as it was also found a minimal amount of times in comparison to other indirect findings. References of support for these perpetrators follows the rhetoric that only the most crazed kind of man could commit a sex crime. The following are examples found in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today* to illustrate these findings.

“Other women, including some knew Mr. Kavanaugh as a teenager, have also defended his character.”

- *The Washington Post* 2018

“Judge Kavanaugh showed America exactly why I nominated him. His testimony was powerful, honest, and riveting,” the president tweeted. “The Senate must vote!”

- *The New York Times* 2018

President Trump on Friday called Kavanaugh a "fantastic man"

- *USA Today* 2018

Content like this shifts the conversation away from being an alleged perpetrator, to portraying them in a positive manner. The first reference in *The Washington Post* highlights the support for the perpetrator since other women consider him too good of a guy to perpetuate these crimes. The second quote found in *The New York Times* exemplifies how being a good perpetrator means adhering to stereotypical ideas of what a non-perpetrator would act like, just like survivors have to do. The last reference in *USA Today* highlights how claiming someone as credible boosts the likelihood that these crimes could not possibly be true if everyone says how great of a person they are. I found that this content supports the claims that these men could not have committed sex crimes because they are “good” men.

Perpetrator Refusals

I found references that deny violence through the use of “denied” and other forms of denial as means to not claim responsibility for the crime. Statements that are denying violence were widespread but minimal in content, typically achieved with short statements that focused on the portrayal of perpetrators as non-offenders of sexual violence. Examples of how this was portrayed in the newspapers is as follows.

Mr. Moonves has denied Ms. Carroll's account of his groping.

- *The New York Times* 2019

Mr. Kavanaugh denied the allegations, saying, "I've never sexually assaulted anyone."

- *The Wall Street Journal* 2018

He has denied all allegations of non-consensual sex.

- *USA Today* 2020

The previous examples found in *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Wall Street Journal* achieve the same goal, denying involvement in a sex crime. But the way this is done varies and provides important insight into how rhetoric surrounding sexual assault is denied and minimized at the same time. The examples from within *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* are straightforward in denying that the accused is not the perpetrator of a specific type of sex crime. However, the last example in *USA Today* needs to be evaluated for their use of “non-consensual sex” instead of sexual assault or rape, which is what non-consensual sex is. I found this renaming of sexual violence to a word or phrase that was less “charged” twenty-seven times throughout all of the articles. Overall, when perpetrators deny violence, they are ultimately calling survivors liars.

A statement that justifies violence would include rhetoric that acknowledges the violence happened and was done by the alleged perpetrator, but explains why they shouldn't be guilty. I found this justification of violence only referenced one time, but was included in analysis as this was the only article that used Goffman's definition of “sad

tales” as both for and against a perpetrator. This occurrence was found in *The New York Times* and is exemplified in the following quote.

The controversy over his treatment of women erupted this spring, after he published an essay in *The New Yorker* detailing how he had been raped as a child, in which he described how the ensuing shame and trauma led him to have troubled relationships with women. The essay was widely praised as a brave and honest account of his painful past, but others saw Mr. Díaz’s account as an effort to pre-empt allegations that he had mistreated women.

- *The New York Times* 2018

Violence was justified here as the journalist highlights the suffering of a sad childhood experience as a reason for violence against women, while at the same time acknowledging that some see this as an excuse. Having this case be found in *The New York Times*, which has by far the largest sample, suggests that this is not a method used often but in very rare circumstances. Overall, I found that these statements work to vindicate the tainted reputation of perpetrators and neglect to hold them accountable.

Accountability

Accountability is being responsible for your actions. Journalists from the multiple publications illustrated various forms of accountability, as I developed the following codes to articulate this rhetoric: Accountability of Perpetrator (284), Accountability Failure (248), Institutional Failure (66), Dearth Change (52), Accountability Increase (279), Accountability by the Public (176), Shaming Blamers (84), Accountability as a Victory (45), Accountability by Victims (111), Accountability of the Self (27), Longing for Change (123), Large Decision-Making (58), and Identifying Remedies (166). In this section, I discuss my findings related to accountability in four ways. First, I describe the

ways in which perpetrator accountability was described and discussed by A. giving a preface to understanding findings of perpetrator accountability in newspapers, B. references to accountability failure and increases, and the shift that exists between the two, C. who and how means of accountability are achieved by, and D. how journalists give direction towards future accountability.

Accountability of Perpetrators

While accountability can be achieved through social or legal means, this section focuses on the accountability of perpetrators through the criminal justice system. More on social accountability is discussed in my section *Accountability by the Public*. I found statements regarding the various stages of legal accountability to be the most referenced code in the context of all accountability. This can include references of legal accountability varying from initial arrest of a perpetrator to serving time. Examples that support my finding are displayed in the following quotes.

Weinstein is also under investigation for sex crimes in London, although police there have said nothing about the status of their inquiries.

- *USA Today* 2020

In June 2014, Mr. Hadden, now 61, was indicted on charges involving the six women, including five counts of a criminal sexual act, two counts of forcible touching and two counts of sexual abuse.

- *The New York Times* 2019

Weinstein is found guilty of sexual assault

- *The Washington Post* 2020

These examples, in this order, provide insight into exactly how legal accountability was described in newspapers. The reference found in *USA Today* highlights how the initial investigation of sex crimes is portrayed as potential accountability in the making. The next quote from within *The New York Times* shows one of the next steps in legal accountability, indictment of sexual assault. The last reference by a journalist in *The Washington Post* was a headline that shows the last step in legal accountability, which is being found guilty of sexual assault. Having been referenced so often, this finding of mine is significant in that the discussion of legal accountability is an on-going and ever-evolving process.

Accountability Failures

Statements that insinuate failed accountability was used often when a journalist would highlight the omission to hold perpetrators either legally or socially liable for their actions. While it is unknown whether journalists actively knew they were exposing an accountability failure or not, it is important to understand the shortcomings of accountability. The following provide examples to understand how accountability failures are portrayed in the news.

In return, Mr. Vance's office agreed not to seek a prison sentence, dropped the remaining charges and promised not to pursue any new sexual abuse allegations.

- *The New York Times* 2019

How has Kelly evaded criminal charges for so long?

- *USA Today* 2019

It's also frustrating for Tamblyn to see individuals such as Brock Turner, who was convicted of sexually assaulting an unconscious woman in 2016, dodge behind

inventive defenses such as "outrcourse" to avoid consequences for their behavior and actions.

- *The Washington Post* 2018

While I cannot know the motives of journalists for certain, there is a divide in the tone of these quotes. The latter quote in *The New York Times* highlights how a portion of content in accountability failure was found; no rage or annoyance of accountability failure but rather just stating that charges were dropped, and a perpetrator is no longer being legally pursued. The second and third quotes found in *The New York Times* and *USA Today* illustrate a different kind of accountability failure. This was the second type of content that was found during accounts of accountability failure and it is more critical of the failure to hold perpetrators accountable. These findings of mine are very important as it contributes to the consciousness-raising for readers to understand the shortcomings of holding perpetrators of sex crimes accountable.

Sometimes journalists would highlight accountability failure as an institutional problem and so it was pursued as a separate finding. I found statements like these were not referenced as often as other forms of accountability, with only being found sixty-five times, yet it shows that accountability can be viewed as a systemic problem and not an individual problem of survivors. The following are examples that highlight how institutional accountability can slip through the cracks of the system.

Trying to hold powerful men accountable is even more difficult in Latin America, because of "machismo, corruption and high levels of impunity," said Teresa Ulloa Ziaurriz, a women's rights activist in Mexico.

- *The New York Times* 2019

I had the rare vantage point of seeing, in real time, how institutions protect men accused of abuse.

- *The Washington Post* 2018

Last year the city's watchdog agency, the Department of Investigation, issued a report on the NYPD's Special Victims Division, saying it had been understaffed for years.

- *The Wall Street Journal* 2019

Just like my latter finding on failed accountability, it is unknown the motives of journalists if they are actively trying to expose institutional failures or if it can be implied from the content. For example, the previous quote found within *The Washington Post* highlights how accountability failure can be directly criticized. The other two examples by journalists in *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* are less direct in their criticisms of institutions but whether it's in Latin America or the United States, both criminal justice systems are discredited as an institution. I find it important that journalists are highlighting accountability failure as a widespread problem versus an individual problem, as they acknowledge systemic problems.

Journalists would also signify accountability failures when they would insinuate the small amount of change that is accrued over time related to perpetrators not being held accountable. Even though I only found these referenced fifty-two times, it helps to identify that journalists report the general failure to hold perpetrators accountable as problematic. This content is usually portrayed in a sullen way to highlight how disappointing it is that accountability is not achieved in present times. The following are examples of the sullen tone when referencing the lack of change in accountability.

the country hasn't changed since the days of Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill.

- *The Washington Post* 2019

"Honestly, I have not seen change," said Ms. Catalinac, who has worked in advertising 14 years.

- *The New York Times* 2019

Yet the "Bachelor" franchise marches on, largely unchanged.

- *USA Today* 2018

These quotes follow the same general pattern that some things are unlikely to ever increase in accountability. These references signify the lack of change that has occurred over a long period of time, with little hopes for the future. Although this finding of mine was not referenced as often as other forms of accountability, it is important to identify areas that have failed to improve.

Accountability Increase

I found that references to accountability failure are usually followed by a discussion of recent increases in accountability as journalists like to show the positive change in social justice. While my findings on accountability failure ignite feelings of distrust and hopelessness in accountability, statements on accountability increase work to do the exact opposite. References to accountability increase are when journalists highlight the positive changes being done to improve accountability of perpetrators or other supportive measures that benefits survivors. Examples of this increase in change are exhibited in the following newspapers.

The New York Police Department is adding 35 investigators to its sex-crimes unit in the wake of an increase in reported rapes across the city.

- *The Wall Street Journal* 2019

The Kavanaugh investigation we didn't get last year

- *The Washington Post* 2019

Laws have been passed in places like California and New York state aimed at training and awareness. Corporations have altered policies, including Microsoft's move to allow employees who previously had contracts with arbitration clauses to seek remedies in open court.

- *USA Today* 2018

The quotes taken from within *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* highlights how institutional change results in increased accountability. The quote found in *The Washington Post* was a title from an article that illustrates the change in legal accountability of a perpetrator, from failed last year to increase accountability this year. I found that changes in accountability increase are important because it shows that change can go in a positive direction for survivors. The following section provides more discussion on how this shift in accountability is found in the news.

Shift in Accountability

Statements that show the relationship between accountability increase and accountability failure insinuate that there is a shift happening for accountability of perpetrators. While failed accountability is viewed as a failure to either support victims or hold perpetrators liable for their actions, accountability increase is the opposite. Statements that indicate there is a change in supporting victims or how we hold perpetrators liable in a positive direction are signifying an accountability increase. Sometimes it starts off with a story of victimization that wasn't supported through the legal accountability of a perpetrator, an accountability failure. Then the author highlights

content that is increasing efforts to better hold people accountability or better support victims. An example of how journalists like to show this shift in accountability is found in the following quote in *USA Today*.

Bill Cosby, who for years dodged allegations that he had preyed on women since the 1960s, was incarcerated last year for sexual assault. After decades of the music industry turning a blind eye to allegations R. Kelly physically and sexually abused scores of girls and women, the singer and songwriter has been charged with federal sex crimes.

- *USA Today* 2019

The first portion of this sentence starts with the accountability failure of Bill Cosby but ends with the repercussions, ultimately holding him legally accountable. The next sentence highlights that same accountability failure and legal accountability of R. Kelly. The journalist here is showing that shift in accountability as increasing from years prior. I found that giving context to the increase in accountability can allow the reader to understand the change that is going on in society.

Accountability by the Public

I found that accountability by the public is when a journalist highlights the population, who are not involved in criminal proceedings, participation in accountability of perpetrators. This shows the active role that everyone takes in accountability of sexual assault perpetrators, not just survivors. Examples of this is the public's role in holding perpetrators socially accountable, like condemning their works, calling for increases in consequences for perpetrators, or people participating in the conversation around sexual assault perpetrators. The following quotes exemplify these types of social accountability.

But she also said she might not have wanted to financially support Mr. Díaz by buying his book, and was relieved when the teacher sent out a PDF.

- *The New York Times* 2019

McDonald's workers walked off the job in a demonstration aimed at fighting harassment in their restaurants.

- *USA Today* 2018

Lisa Sirkin Vielee, a marketing executive in Indianapolis, says roughly a third of her staff of 22 people actively followed the Kavanaugh debate for days. "Every meeting I've been in, the subject's come up," she said on the day of the hearings.

- *The Wall Street Journal* 2018

The first quote from a journalist in *The New York Times* highlights how individuals participated in social accountability, like this student not wanting to buy a perpetrators book. The *USA Today* reference conveys that individuals can take action in demanding more accountability. The last quote found in *The Wall Street Journal* signals how conversations can increase as a form of accountability done socially. I found that accountability by the public is enacted in social settings and that sometimes the consequences for perpetrators is only social and not legal. This is an important finding of mine as it highlights the various ways that one can participate in social accountability.

I found references that indicate journalists can also participate in social accountability by criticizing people. When journalists shame or amplify the shame articulate by others, it gets taken to a new level as there was more overt criticism of people who deny survivors basic rights or perpetrators who deny their claims. Examples of this can be found in the following references.

The way Ms. Argento has been humiliated in the press recalled the attacks of defense

lawyers in rape trials "slurring the reputation of the victims," she said.

- *The New York Times* 2018

There is plenty in their reporting that is alternately heartbreaking and rage-inducing.

- *The Washington Post* 2019

Their dyspepsia came across as out of touch. It was also ironic given the raw political manipulation by Republicans, with their one-vote Senate majority, to try to push Kavanaugh's nomination through without the broader investigation the situation screams for.

- *USA Today* 2018

These journalists decided to amplify their criticisms by shaming people who said or did harmful things. For example, the quote above in *The New York Times* highlights how this journalist gave a megaphone to voice the concerns of survivors being blamed, in a way that shames the media and the lawyers in the trial. The references found in *The Washington Post* and *USA Today* show how journalists themselves can shame blamers in their own words. My finding on shaming others does show that some journalists are willing to socially condemn those who deny violence or blame others.

Accountability as a Victory

With accountability being referenced a majority of the time, I found that sometimes accountability was described as victory when it was successfully achieved. It is important to illustrate accountability of perpetrators as a victory because it shows readers that there is hope for justice. The following quotes highlight how convicting perpetrators of sex crimes is a success for survivors.

This trial is critical to show that predators everywhere will be held accountable and that speaking up can bring about real change.

- *USA Today* 2020

Women who accused Harvey Weinstein of sexual assault and harassment celebrated on Monday after a jury in New York found him guilty of criminal sexual assault in the first degree and rape in the third degree.

- *The New York Times* 2020

Ms. Allred, who represented some of the accusers who testified, addressed the producer himself: "Harvey Weinstein, this justice has been a long time coming but it's finally here, and it's not the end."

- *The Wall Street Journal* 2020

Accountability by Victims

I found that sometimes statements of perpetrator accountability would come distinctively from victim's names or comments. A journalist would use the names and behaviors of these women to connect accountability of perpetrators. The following are examples from publications that use women to claim accountability.

Woman accuses Biden of sex assault

- *The Washington Post* 2020

Christine Blasey Ford, the professor who testified at the Supreme Court confirmation hearing of then-Judge Brett M. Kavanaugh that he had sexually assaulted her in high school.

- *The New York Times* 2019

He is accused by more than 80 women, including A-list stars, of being a serial sexual harasser and predator for decades.

- *USA Today* 2020

The first reference is from a journalist in *The Washington Post* and is a title of an article which puts accountability as the responsibility of survivors. The structure of these

findings follows a pattern that a victim did or does something to a perpetrator. The second example found in *The New York Times* highlights how Dr. Ford is the agent doing something to Mr. Kavanaugh in an attempt to hold him accountable. The *USA Today* quote follows along the same lines, as these are all examples of how accountability is most often the responsibility of the victims to demand justice. I found that it is the use of victim's who is demanding what would otherwise be an accountability failure.

Accountability of the Self

There were statements found of perpetrators apologizing and/or taking responsibility for their actions, which insinuated a form of self-made accountability. It was referenced the least amount of times in the context of accountability, but is important as it is when perpetrators hold themselves accountable. I found that self-proclaimed accountability varied on a spectrum of responsibility with either no conditions or being paired with reducing lethality or renaming abuse. The following exemplify the various ways perpetrators would hold themselves accountable.

In a statement of his own, Mr. Lasseter insisted that he had spent time in "deep reflection, learning how my actions unintentionally made many colleagues uncomfortable, which I deeply regret and apologize for."

- *The New York Times* 2019

"I said a few things I should not have said," Kavanaugh wrote in *The Wall Street Journal*, though he did not say exactly which things he regretted.

- *The Washington Post* 2018

"I feel remorse for this situation. I feel it deep in my heart. I'm really trying to be a better person," Weinstein said, addressing his victims when he spoke just before Burke pronounced his sentence.

- *USA Today* 2020

The examples found in *The New York Times* and *USA Today* were usually how apologies were given, not by verbalizing their sorrow for sexual victimization someone, but by apologizing for something wrong. While the perpetrator apologizing in *The New York Times* takes responsibility, calling their actions “unintentionally making someone uncomfortable,” reduces the lethality that survivors may have experienced. What could be legally defined as sexual assault was reduced to a harmless uncomfortable situation which gaslights survivors into an unknown reality. The reference found in *USA Today* follows along the same lines of calling rape and sexual assault an “incident.” Even though this doesn’t reduce the lethality, renaming it something less severe does injustice to truly holding oneself accountable. The last quote is by a journalist in *The Washington Post* which uses both techniques, renaming and reducing, to apologize without actually being accountable for anything specific. While my findings on apologies did not occur often from quantity of references, it is important to identify when accountability can be coupled with reducing effects.

Future Accountability

I found support for future accountability through references that insinuated hope for future change and justice for survivors of sexual assault. These statements followed the rhetoric of longing for change to end victimization, the impact of large decisions with sexual assault, and identifying remedies that could change the future. This longing for

change associated with sexual assaulted was found often in my newspaper articles, with a total of 123 similar statements. These aspirations usually start off either hopeful or sullen and end with the opposite, either a sullen or hopeful reminder that there is room for improvement. A quote from in *The New York Times* highlights how these qualities are exhibited in the news.

“Things are gradually changing, but it’s still not where it needs to be,” she said.

- *The New York Times* 2018

Sometimes a journalist would use rhetoric that would signal how important and impactful decision making related to accountability of perpetrators would be influential for years to come. These larger-than-life decisions that were present in publications gave tone to how future accountability and change is earned. My findings show that this was most often present during discussions of political and legal decision making surrounding sexual assault. With fifty-eight references that were similar in content, a journalist would highlight how impactful decisions were discussed as beyond the scope of the individual decision and what that decision means going forward. An example of this larger-than-life decision making is illustrated in the quote below found in *USA Today*.

The trial is not just about Weinstein, it's about changing the power imbalances that allowed sexual misconduct to flourish for so long, says Tina Tchen, president and CEO of the #MT-inspired Time's Up Foundation.

- *USA Today* 2020

I found an overwhelming amount of support for another type of future accountability where journalists provide readers with tangible options on how things could change for the better. This rhetoric operates as a call-to-action for people to follow

in remedying problems. Examples of this, which I found referenced 166 times, includes the following found in *The Washington Post*.

It is crucial that - along with telling kids that "no means no" and talking about consent - we burn to the ground the stale boys-will-be-boys, what-was-she-doing-at-the-party thinking. Stop justifying the behavior of predators. And stop blaming victims for being attacked.

- *The Washington Post* 2018

Journalists, like the one in this quote, take an active role on how to participate in change. It is important to recognize the options people have in participating in social change, as references like these go further than just raising consciousness. With around 350 similar references, I found a lot of support for portraying the public's ability to participate in social change.

Journalists Stance

I noticed early on that journalists commonly take multiple stances throughout their articles, almost as if they are adhering to or allowing for all kinds of social beliefs and value systems when considering sexual assault. This may be an attempt to appeal to a diverse set of viewers and also pay lip service to the importance of news seeming "neutral" or "considering all sides." While "covering all the bases" is understandable from a business point of view, it also serves to delegitimize claims from victims and advocates that sexual assault is a serious issue and that victims who have experienced harm are not just "one way" to view violence. Journalists are enacting neutrality as it was located in *The New York Times*.

“His lawyers argue that the women who have accused him had sex with him willingly to advance their careers. Prosecutors claim he lured his accusers to meetings with promises of work, and then physically overpowered them.”

- *The New York Times* 2020

One sentence from this article supports the perpetrator’s claims of victim-blaming by calling the alleged rape, “sex” which removes the lethality and criminality associated with the act by denying violence and blaming women who claim to be victims of having ulterior motives. While this previous sentence was overtly in support of the defendant’s proposition, the second sentence attempts to support victims by highlighting the toxic culture surrounding Hollywood. The sentence ends with a stereotype that “real” rape involves physical violence that a “good” victim should fight off, but couldn’t because he was physically overpowering them. Very few articles take a strong stance in support of victims everywhere and condemn the acts of perpetrators, but when they do, you can tell they are risking the potential of losing readers who don’t agree with this type of unconditional support.

Conclusion

The ways in which sexual assault are discussed within major publications is important as these messages are disseminated into the minds of many and may inform the actions of viewers. Rhetoric is important, as the way words are phrased changes the meaning of messages. Through my analysis of the four highly circulated newspaper publications, I have identified the following areas as important to the discussion of sexual assault in the media; A. how #MeToo is used, B. the differences in victim and perpetrator portrayals, C. the various types of accountability, and D. future direction.

I found that rhetoric regarding #MeToo varies with four different types of usage. Almost half of the statements about #MeToo were positive in nature by either linking it to increases and successes of perpetrator accountability or with references of support. This finding of mine is important as the way #MeToo is discussed, implies more than just how a journalist or who the journalist is referencing feels about ending sexual assault, but the meaning behind those messages. When #MeToo is used as a historical reference to time, like before #MeToo or after #MeToo, it reinforces how pervasive the movement to end sexual violence has permeated our society.

The same goes for my findings on #MeToo being used when topics of sexual assault arise, as a journalist could be considered culturally inept if forgetting to reference such a prevalent type of change, regardless if a stance is attached to its name. I found support for messages that critiqued the movement in a way that provides opportunities for growth as identifiers of #MeToo's short comings were present. Words are powerful and when the #MeToo movement is mocked or insulted as inconvenient, viewers can digest that information in a multitude of ways. While my research cannot determine how readers consume the news, I can articulate the meaning behind content, which is important in determining what changes still need to be made.

I found that supportive statements towards survivors to be more frequently referenced in comparison to the most harmful statements. This gives me hope that the conversation is indeed shifting into a positive direction for survivors and advocacy movements to end violence against them. It is unsure how survivors or others take information from the news with regards to positive or negative references to sexual

assault. The stigma of sexual assault is not one that can be identified as a physical marker, but internalized when in negotiation with others. If positive and negative comments were weighted the same, then it would be easy to analyze what “side” the newspapers were on. Depending on an individual’s fulcrum, one negative piece of content could outweigh an entire article of supportive material.

My coding process revealed that perpetrators are often discussed as something other than perpetrators, either by referring to their positive qualities, making it unlikely they are responsible or by casting doubt when portraying survivors. While positive findings on accountability of perpetrators provides countering evidence for true accountability, having both be so prevalent in major publications highlights the struggle for one to take control. So, while a perpetrator may be discussed in ways that deny violence and reference personal achievements, this reciprocally impacts the way people think of the other half of the sexual assault, which is the victim. To truly hold perpetrators accountable for sex crimes, rhetoric that minimizes the discussion of their actions needs to be excluded.

Statements that denote accountability varied the most in my findings, with many types of rhetorical tactics used to highlight the changes in accountability or lack thereof. With a large portion of journalists disseminating news that shows legal and social accountability, failures and increases in accountability, and opportunities for future accountability, I think this information has the potential to raise consciousness of readers. While the harmful portrayals of survivors and perpetrators counters efforts for real accountability, the trajectory seems to weigh in favor of social justice.

My findings indicate that blame is being used in more indirect ways, which makes it increasingly difficult to criticize journalists or publications who use this subtle blame as it has become so embedded in topics of sexual assault. Acknowledging the pervasiveness of indirect blame versus direct blame could potentially stop the limitations we put on survivors to be “good” victims. As journalists identified in this analysis, the public does have opportunities to create change. With this information, we can identify harmful stereotypes that still exist in newspapers in an attempt to expose and reform it.

Using qualitative methods paired with grounded theory allowed me to immerse myself into the rhetoric used in newspapers. Context matters and without this methodological guidance, I don’t think we would understand the results as well as I do here. While I am proud of where we have come, thanks to the historical references of journalists and a literature review, there is more ground to cover. I think that there is potential to disseminate messages with less indirect blame and more unconditional support. When audiences take the persuasion used by journalists to participate in social accountability, either in a change-making capacity or to raise their consciousness, it can do more than most other messages do.

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