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Public Perceptions of #MeToo Gay Male Sexual Assault Disclosure: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Facebook Comments

Eleanor Young
Western Washington University

Rowan Salton
Western Washington University

Hanna Estes
Western Washington University

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Eleanor Young, Rowan Salton, Hanna Estes

Department of Psychology, Western Washington University

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Dr. Brianna Delker

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Abstract

The present study explores public perceptions of male victimization in the age of #MeToo. Utilizing qualitative content analysis, Facebook comments from popular news media pages' breaking news posts of Kevin Spacey's alleged assault against Anthony Rapp were analyzed for themes. After coding, six initial themes emerged: indirect blame, victim support, non-support of victim(s), perpetrator support, non-support of perpetrator, and trauma distancing. These themes resulted in three overarching findings. Facebook commenters either commented on circumstances surrounding the victim, acts or inactions taken by the perpetrator, or they distanced themselves from the trauma by commenting on happenings separate from the alleged abuse. The researchers then suggest the implications of an online world of segmented discourse for marginalized individuals in an era of growing support for survivors of sexual violence.

Introduction

Born out of a desire to cultivate community and facilitate healing, Tarana Burke founded the #MeToo movement in 2006 which has since transformed from a local organization into a global campaign, exposing the public to a conversation about sexual assault that was once held solely behind closed doors (History and Vision, n.d.). Along with the explosive resurgence of the movement in October 2017 came a platform that allowed survivors the chance to break the silence that has been forced upon them through personal and systemic invalidation (Salter, 2012), bringing with it hundreds-of-thousands of untold stories of sexual assault and harassment (Tambe, 2018; History and Vision, n.d.). Unfortunately, this new wave of feminism has been criticized for its exclusion of several highly impacted communities including, racial minorities (Tambe, 2018; Onwuachi-Willig, 2018), LGBTQ populations (Ison, 2019), and male survivors (Brookshier, 2019).

One of these communities in particular, that of male sexual assault survivors, has been perpetually underrepresented in both public and academic discussions (Peterson, Voller, Polusny, & Murdoch, 2011). This lack of research on the prevalence of male sexual assault has led to a range of reported rates anywhere from as low as 0.2% to upwards of 68%, depending on identity and the community in question (Peterson et al., 2011). Despite the inconclusive research on male sexual victimization, it is evident that males experience sexual assault at an alarming rate when compared to public perception about the rarity of its occurrence. Not only do males encounter the same forms of sexual victimization as women, but they also find themselves in the position of having to reconcile their own traumatic experiences with the imposed expectations of a society dominated by toxic masculinity (Weiss, 2010; Brookshier, 2019). Thus, it is important

to recognize the courage of those men who choose to come forward and validate their experiences just as much as the women who have found support in this movement.

Disapproval regarding the erasure of marginalized identities from the #MeToo movement was apparent from the very beginning as people felt that credit was not being given where credit was due (Onwuachi-Willig, 2018). Such anger was well deserved as the movement was founded more than a decade prior by Tarana Burke, a black woman from New York, who sought to raise awareness of the disproportionate ways that sexual violence impacts marginalized people and women of color (Staff, n.d.; Onwuachi-Willig, 2018; Tambe, 2018). In their respective articles, researchers Onwuachi-Willig (2018) and Tambe (2018) discuss the issue in great detail providing insight into the controversial movement that Tambe (2018) refers to as the white woman's movement. Both Tambe (2018) and Onwuachi-Willig (2018) recognize that sexual harassment and assault are pervasive problems that affect men and women of all colors and identities; however, they also bring to light the disproportionate support for white women survivors both online and in popular media coverage. The true nature of these accusations is reflective of a society that sees some victims as authentic and discredits the victimization of others.

As previously stated, women of color are not the only victims that find themselves positioned on the outside looking in as a movement that outwardly seems to advocate for them, reliably fights to stifle their voice. Male victims of sexual assault and members of the LGBTQ community have experienced a similar lack of support within the #MeToo movement (Brookshier, 2019; Ison, 2019). The problem is only exacerbated by uniquely insensitive responses from the media and general public which continue to perpetuate victim blaming and

eventual silencing within these communities of survivors (Jackson, Valentine, Woodward, &
Pantalone, 2016; Peterson et al., 2011; Weiss, 2010).

This lack of support for male victims of sexual assault can, in part, be attributed to
societal beliefs about what characteristics and traits are acceptable for masculine identities.
Among these are the assumptions that men must be resilient, strong, and impenetrable,
characteristics that counter the images of sexual victimization. Therefore, if these men are
sexually assaulted, then they have somehow failed in their masculine duty to be able to stand up
for themselves (Weiss, 2010). These socially-endorsed constructs of masculinity within our
culture are typically incompatible with the acceptable "victim identity" embodied as a helpless,
white, female, leaving victimized men with limited capacities for understanding their
experiences (Charak, Eshelman, & Messman-Moore, 2018; Jackson et al., 2016). More
specifically, gay men experience increased stigma due to the conflation of their identities within
the context of sexual violence (Jackson et al., 2016). Not only have they been unsuccessful in
protecting themselves against sexual assault (Weiss, 2010), they also face a great deal of
invalidation from those who hold damaging beliefs about the role of sex in the LGBTQ
community (Jackson et al., 2016, Salter, 2012). Men are expected to desire, control, and initiate
sex, thus when a man states that he did not want or consent to having sex he violates the code of
male sexuality (Davies, Pollard, & Archer, 2006; Weiss, 2010).

Due to this stigma and the shame surrounding male victims of sexual abuse, many men
choose not to disclose or seek treatment for their experiences. One potential consequence of
disclosure that men face is secondary victimization, defined by Jackson et al. (2016) as victim-
blaming attitudes and behaviors which can perpetuate symptoms of sexual assault and includes
victims' perceptions of interactions with institutions. These institutions can include legal or

medical providers, the culture surrounding them, the justice system, or apathetic mass media. Each of these plays a critical role in maintaining victim-blaming attitudes that can lead survivors to feeling violated, disappointed, and re-victimized all over again (Jackson et al., 2016). This is especially true for men within the LGBTQ community who face additional barriers to reporting. For example, LGBTQ victims of violence described sexual-orientation related discrimination where survivors feared being "outed" in the process of coming forward (Jackson et al., 2016), resulting in lowered likelihood of reporting to police, medical providers, or family and friends for LGBTQ men. The reluctancy to disclose and seek support can also be attributed to male LGBTQ survivors perceptions of the institutions beliefs and assumptions about who can or cannot be a true victim of sexual assault. Institutions may deny that men can be legitimate victims of sexual assault and minimize their experience (Jackson et al., 2016). This stigma surrounding male sexual assault helps to create an environment of toxic masculinity that stifles weakness, imposing that men should suppress their feelings and deny the possibility of male sexual assault. Subsequently, when men are victimized, they are assumed to be unharmed by the experience or to have enjoyed it, where gay men are even stereotyped as wanting and getting pleasure from rape (Weiss, 2010). Combined with stigma, this misinformation results in lackluster efforts to prevent male sexual assault and prevents the sponsorship of research on the subject when compared with efforts to minimize sexual violence against women (Peterson et al., 2011).

These myths surrounding male sexual assault have resulted in limited literature on the experiences of male victims. Most of the current research focuses on specific populations such as survivors of child sexual abuse (Weiss, 2010), veterans, or incarcerated men (Peterson et al., 2011) and leaves out other victimized populations such as male LGBTQ survivors. Research on

male sexual assault also typically utilizes instruments designed to measure women's experiences of sexual assault and thus, lack measurements tailored toward the unique experiences of male survivors. This faulty-generalization has greatly contributed to definitions of male sexual assault that differ across studies leaving many researchers to rely on the legal definitions of rape. Unfortunately, for many states these violent acts are only considered rape if they involve intercourse with vaginal penetration; therefore, according to legal definitions, men cannot be victims of rape. For these reasons, researchers may operationally define rape in ways that leave out gay male victims entirely (Peterson et al., 2011).

In sum, the research on male victims is very limited and both the definition and measurement of male sexual assault can vary from study to study. Another major gap in the literature is the nature of public perception and understanding of male sexual assault cases within the LGBTQ community. Additionally, research that does look into male sexual assault has continued to exclude the unique experiences of gay men and the pervasiveness of sexual violence within the LGBTQ community. The current study will focus on filling this gap, looking at the ways that people view and respond to gay male victims' disclosure of sexual violence. Further analysis will also seek to understand how news source's political affiliations are reflected in their followers' commentary. Our study will focus on a specific case of male sexual assault within the LGBTQ community, looking at public commentary of Anthony Rapp's #MeToo disclosure in October of 2017 across several different breaking news stories on Facebook regarding the case.

Method

Research design

In order to further understand society's reaction to male victimization, the present study utilized content analysis to review Facebook comments on the breaking news stories of Anthony

Rapp's disclosure in October 2017. Qualitative content analysis allows for a relatively assumption-free analysis and categorization of the online comments into evolving codes that fit within the parameters of our study. Qualitative content analysis is additionally advantageous because it allows for interpretive codes to emerge throughout analysis, a helpful technique when there is limited research on public perceptions of men's disclosure during the #MeToo movement.

The researchers have minimal experience with this style of analysis but are very familiar with the nature of online discourse surrounding disclosure of sexual violence for all genders. Of influence to our lenses of analysis are feminist theory and queer theory as well as sexual assault and domestic violence empowerment-based advocacy techniques. Through these lenses codes will be created, recognizing the importance of validating survivors of trauma and the identity-based barriers to support for LGBTQ survivors.

Data sources

For this research project we are choosing to analyze user comments on news articles shared by the top five news websites in the United States: CNN, New York Times, Huffington Post, Fox News, and USA Today (Feedspot). To be included in this study the news media's Facebook page needed to have high interaction with their posts, which USA Today did not meet. For the purposes of this study, Buzzfeed was included instead due to their high level of interaction on social media and because Buzzfeed News published the first article on Anthony Rapp's #MeToo disclosure. For each news source the most timely article reporting Anthony Rapp's disclosure was found on Facebook. Description of the pages and individual posts can be found below.

CNN

CNN was founded in 1980 with headquarters located in Atlanta, Georgia. Readers of CNN are 81% democrat or independent and 61% of viewers are between the ages of 30-64 (Pew, 2012). Facebook accounts for 47.99% of all social media interaction with the page (similarweb). CNN's Facebook page has 32 million likes as of the current studies publication. The specific post used in this study was published on October 30th, 2017 and was titled "Kevin Spacey responds to allegation of sexual advance towards a minor in 1986." The post has 1.4k reactions, 176 shares, and 891 total comments.

New York Times

The New York Times was founded in 1896 in New York, NY where its headquarters remain. The viewers are predominantly independent or democratic (83%) and 63% of viewers are between 18-49 years old (Pew, 2012). The New York Times Facebook page has 16 million likes. The initial post the New York Times shared on Facebook was titled "Kevin Spacey apologizes after allegation of decades-old sexual advance on a minor" and was published on October 29th, 2017. The post has 4k reactions, 525 shares, and 1.4k comments.

Huffington Post

The Huffington Post was founded in 2005 and has its headquarters in New York, NY. The publication is regarded as politically left and largely read by people between the ages of 25-44 at 41.6% (Pew, 2012; Hwong, 2018). Facebook accounts for the largest social media platform traffic of the page at 36.15% of total (similarweb). Huffington Post's Facebook page has 10 million likes. Their original post was published on October 30th, 2017 and was titled, "Anthony Rapp accuses Kevin Spacey of sexual harassment." The post has 615 reactions and 769 comments.

Fox News

Fox News was founded in 1996 with its headquarters in New York, NY. Fox News is a conservative news source with 77% of readers polling either republican or independent, their average viewers are between the ages of 30-64 (Pew, 2012). Additionally, Fox has the lowest number of readers between 18-29 at 19%. The news sources social media traffic largely consists of Facebook interactions at 63.24% of the total online social involvement (similarweb). Fox News' Facebook page currently has 17 million likes. The news source posted their initial article on October 29,2017 titled, "Actor: Kevin Spacey made sexual advances towards me when I was 14." The post has 10k reactions, 2k shares, and 5.3k comments.

Buzzfeed

Buzzfeed was founded in 2006 and has its headquarters in New York, NY. While all other sources had a near 50/50 split in gender of viewers, Buzzfeed is predominantly viewed by women at 68.8% (Hwong, 2018). Buzzfeed also interacts with a younger audience with 43.7% of users between the ages of 18-34 (Hwong, 2018). Buzzfeed has the largest social media presence of all our data sources at 31.75% of total interactions facilitated on social media platforms (rather than the outlets website), 22.21% higher than the following news source, New York Times (similarweb). Facebook is Buzzfeed's top social media site and encompasses 73.29% of total social media presence. Buzzfeed has 11 million likes on their standard Facebook page. Buzzfeed news published the original news story on October 29th, 2017. The Facebook article titled, "Actor Anthony Rapp: Kevin Spacey made a sexual advance toward me when I was 14" has 8.8k reactions, 1.8k shares, and 4.2k comments.

Researcher description

The researchers of the present study are all white, undergraduate female students in their early twenties at a public university in Northwestern United States. All three prioritize analyzing

systems of injustice through an intersectional lens. Two of the researchers are trained domestic violence and sexual assault advocates who view trauma through the lens of advocacy and empowerment and may have more familiarity with typical responses of trauma survivors. One of the researchers identifies in the LGBTQ community bringing extra awareness to homophobia and allyship in the comment sections.

Data identification procedures

The present study analyzed public comments under the Facebook posts, outlined above, for all five selected news media sources. In order to understand public perceptions of gay men's disclosure of abuse, comment boards were selected as the cultural content to be analyzed in this study. Facebook was the most utilized social media domain by all sources. In addition, the comment sections under Facebook posts can be highly interactive and provide an insight into the public consciousness around different phenomena. In order to collect the data for the present study we first found the original source via searching the Facebook page's history for the keywords of our study topic (Anthony Rapp, Keven Spacey, etc.,) and finding the earliest published news story. Researchers then identified the top twenty comments (based on the highest interactions, i.e. likes and replies) from each post. This was repeated for all five news sources. Of note, the study design was adapted from the original data collection plan to collect twenty comments per source rather than ten comments, in order to analyze a significant amount of data. Unfortunately, due to minimal interaction, Huffington Post only yielded 19 out of the desired 20 comments. In total 99 Facebook comments were coded from all sources combined.

Data analysis

The present study utilized Erlingsson and Brysiewicz's (2017) guide in approaching content analysis, the qualitative strategy used to answer our research question. The selected

Facebook comments were reread multiple times in order to become familiar with the data before

coding. All researchers coded the 99 comments individually giving all comments at least one

code, if not multiple, that embodied its content. Then researchers met and discussed their unique

codes and found the commonalities in analysis across coders. Finally, researchers organized the

codes into larger themes which emerged during and after analysis.

Results

Analysis of the 99 Facebook comments yielded 50 separate codes. Researchers then

compiled similar codes into six major themes that were represented throughout the public's

interaction with these breaking news stories. Themes were first generated by researchers through

general discussion regarding the commonalities perceived among codes. Patterns were identified

in these 50 codes which resulted in six foundational themes. Consequently, various codes may be

present among multiple themes. Finally, broader themes were then broken down further to reveal

any necessary sub-categories within the six major themes. The six major themes are as follows:

1. Indirect Blame, 2. Victim Support, 3. Non-support of Victim(s), 4. Perpetrator Support, 5.

Non-support of Perpetrator, and 6. Trauma Distancing (see *Figure 1* for a visual map of themes).

Theme 1: Indirect Blame

One of the most glaring themes across all news articles was indirect blame. Researchers

defined this theme as instances of blame that found fault with anyone other than the perpetrator.

Although victim blaming is a common form of indirect blame that was present throughout all

comment boards (*Figure 2*), many users also blamed the victim's parents and Hollywood as an

institution. Some Facebook users also accused the perpetrator of indirect blame, citing his ill-

timed "coming out" and his use of LGBTQ identity as an excuse for his inappropriate behavior.

Overall, the theme of indirect blame was consistently observed across all news source samples.

Indirect Blame by Facebook Commenters

Indirect blame was most commonly engaged in by commenters and directed towards the

victim, his parents, and the institution of Hollywood. These types of blame were often

compounded in comments, with many users exhibiting a combination of the three. For example,

one comment read, "I'm curious why a 14 year old is out in NYC without any parent, guardian,

and the last to leave an adult party. No way no how should that opportunity have ever had the

chance to happen. All parties should bear some responsibility here" (H10). Another blamed both

the victim and his parents calling their integrity into question by stating, "A 14 year old attending

a party alone with adults drinking. Hmmmmmm. Mom, Dad did you approve of your son going

out on his own? Just saying. Innocent until proven otherwise. And 30 years later?" (C8). Finally,

an example of Hollywood blame can be seen alongside these other types of blame in a comment

that reads, "First of all… I am not absolving Spacey or placing blame on the victim or his

parents… BUT… Am I the only one that always wonders where these underage children's

parents are? And why the rules for child stars are so bent and blurred? There are so many layers

to this dysfunctional culture of Hollywood that are being brought to light, I just hope parents of

young actors and actresses now are taking notes" (B12).

Indirect Blame by Perpetrator

There were also instances of commenters accusing Spacey of utilizing indirect blame in

his attempts to distract from the allegations by choosing to reveal his sexual identity instead of

taking responsibility for his actions. For example, one user commented that, "He [Spacey] seems

to be confusing assault on a minor with homosexuality" (N9). Another questioned his motives

stating, "...him being gay seems to be being used as a shield for his prior action. Being gay and being a child predator are not synonymous last I checked. I'm confused… what does him being gay have to do with what he did? Why did he mention it? Is he saying that because he was in conflict with himself that it caused him to act out towards the boy?" (N8). Lastly, this commenter made their disapproval for Spacey's actions clear in their comment that reads, "being gay does not excuse his pedophilia. Disgusting!" (N3).

Theme 2: Victim Support

Many comments emphasized support for both Anthony Rapp specifically and survivors in general, resulting in a major theme of victim support (*Figure 3*). Victim support is defined by the researchers as belief and advocation rooted in defending the choices and experiences of victims of sexual violence. Facebook users displayed support of victims through defense of the victim's disclosure with comments such as, "Sorry, but being a sexual assault victim isn't exactly the career-booster idiots like you seem to think it is" (B10a). Support for survivors was also seen in the belief of delayed disclosure, how Anthony Rapp "waited" 30 years to disclose this assault. Some users advocated for the circumstances of his delayed disclosure, articulating how challenging it is for survivors to be believed. One user wrote about how hard it is to be heard and believed saying, "Why is everyone saying he hasn't spoken up? He has, multiple times! It just doesn't do much for you when everything you say falls on deaf ears… then when people finally want to listen you suddenly spoke up too late…" (C11). Multiple users also displayed belief in survivors through explaining the specific challenges of male survivors of violence. One user wrote, "So a lady accuses a man and we all believe her. A man accuses a gay man he molested him when he was underaged and people doubt him. Sorry folks we need equality. He deserves to be heard as much as these ladies deserve it too" (H8). Another way Facebook users supported

victims was through the recognition that Anthony Rapp was a child when this alleged event occurred. One user wrote, "The majority of us are doing perfectly good at keeping our hands off of innocent children and just letting kids be kids. It's honestly just a lot of men (straight and gay) that are having a frequent issue with sexual assault. Stop" (N1). By highlighting that he was a minor, these users help to remove blame from Rapp and highlight that the issue of assault falls upon perpetrators. Lastly, support for survivors was shown through an emphasis of support for the #MeToo movement which simultaneously validated Anthony Rapp's own experiences. These comments revolved around the watershed impact of the #MeToo movement and how it enabled many people to come forward with their stories. One user wrote, "If people are coming out now with their stories NOW, is because BIG domino (Weinstein) toppled" (B19a).

Theme 3: Non-support of Victim(s)

While support for survivors can be seen throughout the comment sections, another major theme that emerged was the opposite, a non-support of survivors (*Figure 4*). Researchers defined non-support of survivors as any comment that held negative views towards the victim including disbelief, doubt, skepticism, and minimization of the trauma experience. Interestingly, this disbelief was framed around not only Anthony Rapp's individual experience, but also a general disbelief in the experience of all survivors.

Non-support of Anthony Rapp.

Users critiqued Anthony Rapp predominantly through disbelief in delayed disclosure. Many users emphasized their reservations around a victim waiting 30 years to disclose assault publicly with comments such as, "Why did Rapp wait until now? If this happened 30 years ago, where has he been? I think Kevin Spacey's response was honest and appropriate. Thank you, Anthony Rapp, for giving me another reason to not watch Star Trek Discovery [his recent acting

venture]" (H14). Further, users also attempted to invalidate and criticize Rapp's choices in disclosing his experience. In an attempt to understand his motives one user wrote, "Anthony makes this allegation 30 years later, at a time when everyone's sensibilities and feelings are still raw over this subject. Of course we want to side with the accuser/victim, but this raises many more questions. It's a little scary how quick judgement is passed nowadays" (H19). Multiple comments also asserted that Rapp was being "attention seeking" and utilizing the current #MeToo spotlight to his advantage with comments such as, "If I reported everyone guy that tried to corner me but I walked away there would be way too many to count. This guy wants something from Kevin Spacey. Don't be naive folks" (H4). Some users also minimized Rapp's trauma experience stating, "they all screw each other in Hollywood" (F17) reducing Rapp's trauma experience to something casual and benign. Lastly, many users asserted their disbelief in both Rapp and his disclosure which can be seen in this comment, "So, 30 years ago Spacey *might* have made a pass at a teen? The story (ever changing) sounds like mixed signals & why you out so late. Spacey apologizes for something he states he does not remember. Why is he being treated like a pedo? His coming officially out is ill timed, but again, he apologized for a pass that went absolutely nowhere 39 years ago that he says he does not remember. People put away your pitchforks!" (H3).

Non-support of all victims.

In addition to a disbelief in Rapp's experience, a general pattern of non-support of *all* survivors was present in the Facebook comments. Most of these comments were rooted in distrust of the #MeToo movement asserting that the movement inspired a bandwagon effect and it created opportunities for "five minutes of fame" for celebrity-survivors. One comment reads, "Now we start the witch hunt destroy everyone who gets accused regardless of facts or evidence.

Now I see how the Harlem witch trials started" (N6), which earned the comment response of,

"'Harlem witch trials'? You are clearly a bastion of deep critical thinking" (N6a). Users

additionally revealed their ignorance and skepticism towards the effects of trauma on all

survivors with one user stating, "All of a sudden the secrets of Hollywood are coming out. It's

been known what women have gone through for decades. Their lack of coming forward back

then created more victims. No one should endure the BS, male or female, but those who kept

silence allowed there to be other victims. They chose being rich and famous over doing the right

thing…" (F10).

Lastly, some users revealed the doubt they feel towards all victims that come forward

with one user stating, "Not sure I believe this. Gotten to the point where we don't know what is

real and what is a desperate attempt at 15 minutes of fame" (F8). This category encompasses the

public skepticism towards disclosure of abuse and the hesitance to rally behind survivors'

experiences.

Theme 4: Perpetrator Support

Another major theme within the comments was perpetrator support (*Figure 5*), defined as

any comments that showed support for Kevin Spacey. Support was seen as excusing Spacey's

actions, normalizing his behaviors, and disbelief of Rapp's accusations. Many users displayed

support for Spacey through emphasizing the sufficiency of his apology and thus, absolving him

of any subsequent responsibility, such as one user who said, "And apologizing is the right

response, recognizing the inappropriate behavior and work against it. What would you have him

do? Kill himself out of shame?" (N10). Users also highlighted that Rapp was 14 at the time of

the assault suggesting he was not a helpless child but, in fact, capable of making his own

decisions, justifying Spacey's actions with comments such as, "When I was 14 I was already

getting served in pubs. I'm not really defending this but it is possible that this kid was portraying himself to being much older than he was and what exactly determines unwanted sexual advances?" (H16) and, "… Then, he [Rapp] goes to this adult man's party where he goes into the man's bedroom, sits down on the bed, and watches tv because he was bored. Why didn't he just go home instead of watching tv in the guy's bedroom?...As for Rapp being a child, in many states 14 or even younger is the age of consent…" (H1). Some users not only excused Spacey's actions in their comments, but also normalized them. For example, one comment reads "[I] would love to meet someone who didn't come close to crossing a line while drunk" (H6) and another user states, "He didn't rape the teen. It was inappropriate but hardly worth all this outrage. He apologized. Case closed" (N20). Support for Spacey was also shown through comments that suggest that the only reason Rapp, or other survivors, have come forward is because sexual assault is now a popular topic. One user stated, "It's just a little suspicious that everyone just happen to have these things happen, now that it's popular to talk about" (B13), suggesting that Rapp's story was false, and that it was a way for Rapp to gain attention for himself while bringing down a beloved actor.

Theme 5: Non-support of perpetrator

Although many users showed support for Kevin Spacey, the opposite was also true, producing another major theme: non-support of perpetrator. This theme was evident across all comment sections (*Figure 6*). Researchers defined this theme as any comments that held negative views toward Spacey. Three major categories within this overarching theme were identified: criticism, questioning of his actions, and a general loss of respect for Spacey. These categories reflect the different ways in which users were unsupportive of Spacey, with the majority of users' non-support concerning his ill-timed coming out.

Criticism and Questioning

A pattern seen across almost all news platforms was criticism toward Spacey and questioning of his actions. Many users questioned Spacey's reasoning for coming out in response to Anthony Rapp's disclosure about the assault, suggesting that disclosing his homosexuality was intended to distract from Rapp's accusations. One user wrote "I don't care that he's gay, but it seems like he's using this moment to officially "come out" as a way to deflate from the charges laid at his door" (C1). Self-identified LGBTQ users disavowed Spacey's coming out, asserting distance between Spacey and the LGBTQ community. One user wrote, "As a gay male, I will not commend him on his "courage" to come out as it wasn't for the right reasons. It's obvious he's trying to deflect attention away from his alleged sexual scandal with a minor by giving the media something else to talk about" (C2). One user also criticized Spacey's actions and his coming out, comparing it to the Harvey Weinstein case saying, "I wonder…..if Weinstein had released a statement asserting, 'that I have been living my life as a heterosexual man….' if things might have played out differently for him" (H11).

Inexcusable

Many users also expressed beliefs that sexual assault is an inexcusable action therefore, Spacey's drunken state and sexuality do not excuse his behavior toward Rapp. One commenter criticized these explanations stating, "Being 'drunk' doesn't turn one into a sexual predator who preys on children. His sexuality (open secret) isn't the question no the excuse here: it's his conduct as an adult towards a child" (N13). Users also expressed distress over the idea that Spacey's sexuality had been cited as the motive behind his behavior, such as one user who wrote, "Also thanks for the strong implication that the reason you sexually preyed on a young boy was that you were gay. The rest of the LGBTQ+ community does not need you throwing us under the

bus like that" (N1). Another comment read "U don't get to be exonerated for sexual assault by coming out of the closet and politicizing LGBTQ people when people use this very example as why gay people are bad for society he needs to be tried like Bill Cosbey and Harvey" (N7). This category shows users' tendency to be unsupportive of Spacey using his LGBTQ identity and intoxication as an excuse for his actions.

Loss of Respect for Perpetrator

Lastly, many commenters expressed their loss of respect for Spacey, such as one user who said, "I had such admiration for Kevin Spacey as an actor but that ended today. He cannot blame the alcohol for his behavior towards a child" (C13). These comments conveyed the shocking realization that the actor these users had known and loved was not who they thought he was. Another user wrote "NOT KEVIN SPACEY. WHAT THE FUCK, DUDE. I TRUSTED YOU. I BELIEVED IN YOU" (B2). In contrast, other users emphasized how unsurprised they were with the allegations stating that, "actors are not angels… You take brilliance, ego, power and add a touch of the necessary insanity it takes to act for a living - you get some pretty fucked up behavior" (B20). This category showed commenters reacting in numerous ways to Rapp's allegations, ultimately resulting in a loss of respect for Kevin Spacey.

Theme 6: Trauma Distancing

The final theme that researchers derived from the sampled Facebook comments describes users' tendencies to remove themselves from the trauma, both as it relates to Anthony Rapp's allegations, and sexual victimization in general (*Figure 7*). In reading through the data, it quickly became apparent that many users perceived sexual violence as an issue that seldom affected their own community. Utilizing humor and anti-Hollywood rhetoric, users revealed an "us versus them" mindset that ultimately minimizes the extensive impact of sexual violence across cultures

and society. For example, one user expressed their negative feelings towards Hollywood by stating, "So aren't we learning that this place called Hollywood is actually a nasty swamp full of disgusting human beings. And they lecture us common people from their high horses" (F2). Another comment read, "I knew it was bad but yikes! If you haven't been raped or have raped someone in Hollywood, please just raise your hand. Maybe that would be easier" (F16). One user even alluded to current political controversies by stating, "So do we elect him president next orrrrrrr ¯_(ツ)_/¯" (B6). Not only do these types of responses minimize the impact of the survivor's trauma experience, they show a certain level of ignorance and apathy towards such acts of violence. For a full breakdown of all codes across themes see *Figure 8.*

Discussion

The present study contributes significantly to the literature in its novel approach to understanding public perceptions towards instances of gay male sexual abuse disclosure. While many Americans are plugged-in to the world of social media, thus aware of this commentary, few studies have utilized these platforms for data sources, striking to the center of contemporary discourse on hot button topics like the #MeToo movement. Through the present study's utilization of content analysis, multiple interwoven themes emerged, revealing mixed attitudes and messages directed towards male survivors of abuse.

Central Contributions

Comments Relating to Victim(s)

The #MeToo movement has emphasized the necessity of believing survivors rather than defaulting to suspicion and criticism, which in turn has aided in exposing the true prevalence of sexual violence within modern society (Tambe, 2018). Thorough analysis of the public

commentary on Anthony Rapp's disclosure showed a tendency towards victim-support, primarily through discussions of the #MeToo movement. Research has shown that the resurgence of this movement in October 2017 both inspired conversation around sexual violence and provided an important space for women to come forward with their stories and participate in public debates about sexual harassment, sexism, and rape culture. In their research, authors Gill and Orgad (2018) discuss that bearing witness to the sheer number of women coming forward since #MeToo has forced a change in the public's perceptions and discussions regarding the pervasiveness of sexual assault within society. Not only are people seeing more women come forward to share their stories, but they are also seeing powerful men held accountable for their actions, such as the recent arrest of Harvey Weinstein. This sense of justice has sparked conversations about the power dynamics that exist between men and women within these violent sexual encounters and the way that this imbalance of power influences victim disclosure. Research on the #MeToo movement has focused on the influx of female survivors within Hollywood and politics who have chosen to come forward, such as Taylor Swift, Christine Blasey Ford, Alyssa Milano, etc. Much of the research attributes the increase in number of disclosures to the ways in which the movement has shifted public perspectives on sexual assault cases and victims themselves, allowing more space for survivors to come forward and receive support (Gill & Orgad, 2018).

The #MeToo movement also elicited conversations about toxic masculinity and the socially constructed ideas that men should maintain a persona of the tough guy, repress their emotions, view violence as a direct measure of their power, and enjoy sex at all times. While this idea of toxic masculinity has previously been considered a cause of sexual violence against women, it should also be viewed as a barrier for men to come forward, specifically for gay male

survivors (Brookshier, 2019). Throughout the #MeToo movement, the majority of victim support has been directed towards white female victims and has left out the experiences of gay male survivors. There are clear discrepancies between public perceptions of male and female sexual assault, with male disclosures being regularly dismissed and overlooked. For gay men who are often stereotyped as hypersexual, this invalidation stems from an assumption that if they were assaulted they were asking for it and actually enjoyed it (Jackson et al., 2016). Public perceptions regarding gay male disclosure of sexual assault have not been represented in current research and are worth pursuing in future studies to better understand the experience of sexual assault for gay men as compared to women, or heterosexual men.

In light of Anthony Rapp publicly identifying as a gay man, his decision to expose Kevin Spacey's sexual advances displays bravery and initiative that is vital within both the LGBTQ community specifically, and society in general. Within this community, gay men often face what one participant in Jackson et al. (2016) study described as "double stigma... and double silencing" due to the complex layers of their identity. Not only do these men experience the same victim-blaming responses to disclosure that female survivors face, they also carry the added burden of homophobia, stereotyping, and the belief that their experience is just part of their lifestyle (Jackson et al., 2016; Davies et al., 2006). For these reasons, gay male victims of sexual violence face an impossible choice. They must choose to disclose their assault, risking stigmatization and a myriad of other consequences reported by survivors (Jackson et al., 2016), or emotionally bury their trauma and bear the guilt and shame imposed on them by a society that refuses to acknowledge them as genuine victims. Consistent with previous research, these types of invalidating reactions were apparent across all comment boards.

While victim blaming was most prominent in the Facebook comments, and has been thoroughly discussed throughout psychological literature, there were additional ways that commenters redirected blame away from the perpetrator. Users across all news sources used the online platform to place blame on Rapp's parents and Hollywood as an institution rather than holding Kevin Spacey accountable for his actions. These methods of indirect blame have not been represented previously in the literature but are worth pursuing in future studies in order to more fully understand public response to victims of sexual violence.

Comments Relating to the Perpetrator

In-depth analysis of the public commentary regarding Anthony Rapp's disclosure exposed noticeable differences when compared with the conventional response to female victims. Similar to Rapp, female victims of sexual violence often experience public criticism in the form of harassment, whether it be sexual, racial, or gendered in nature (Onwuachi-Willig, 2018); however, the perpetrators of these sex crimes against women seldom receive the amount of support witnessed in the public's response to Rapp's allegations. There are two possible explanations for this phenomenon which will be discussed here in further detail: socially acceptable explicit attitudes and power-dynamics.

First, psychologists distinguish between two types of attitudes, implicit and explicit. Implicit attitudes refer to hidden biases that exist outside the realm of human consciousness, whereas explicit attitudes are biases within human awareness that we can willingly share with the world (Banaji & Greenwald, 2016). Since 2001, a number of different research studies have considered the development of these biases over time and have shown that, as we age, our explicit bias decreases while our implicit biases remain the same (Baron & Banaji, 2006). This suggests that as people become increasingly aware of socially acceptable behavior, they become

less willing to vocalize their explicit attitudes regarding race, gender, religion, etc. for fear of being labeled as prejudiced (Baron & Banaji, 2006). In the same way, it could be argued that decades of advocating for female victims of sexual violence, culminating in the 2017 #MeToo movement, negatively influenced people's willingness to publicly support accused sex offenders. However, due to a lack of representation of both male and LGBTQ victims within these conversations (Brookshier, 2019; Ison, 2019), public awareness is noticeably absent regarding socially acceptable reactions towards these cases. Consequently, this support for the perpetrator only encourages the silencing of and perpetuates the stigma faced by these victims. Further research is necessary in order to understand the validity of these speculations.

Another explanation for the high levels of perpetrator support is the power-imbalance that exists between perpetrator and victim. Within the United States, a society built on and maintained through power dynamics, the negative impacts of gender-based violence are wide-spread and undeniable. Throughout the years, scholars have argued that the root cause of this violence is the well-established heteropatriarchy, a term coined by Yep (2003) that refers to, "...a system of male dominance through the institution of compulsory heterosexuality." In the absence of a gender-based power imbalance, there are two systems of inequality that are at play within the allegations made by Anthony Rapp. Primarily, Enck (2018) argues that Spacey benefited from a system of homopatriarchy (Esparza, 2017) in which sexual minority men, "...embrace or legitimate some of the adverse ramifications associated with patriarchy in return for reaping some of its benefits." Spacey was able to benefit from the homopatriarchy by leveraging his male privilege to perpetrate harm while also using in-group LGBTQ dynamics to remain in the closet. As outlined in Enck (2018), LGBTQ media sites in 2001 had policies in place that banned outing individuals as gay without their consent, leaving survivors of same-sex abuse without a platform

to come forward with their experiences both from within the LGBTQ community and outside it. The second power imbalance recognizes the level of fame and admiration granted to Kevin Spacey through his years as a beloved, Oscar-winning actor. Although both Spacey and Rapp are well-known stage and screen actors, Rapp does not have nearly as big of a fan-base as Spacey. This could result in significant disparities in perceptions of truth-telling based solely on the recognizability of the actors, resulting in the familiar Spacey being seen as incapable of committing abuse.

The final central theme regarding the perpetrator was criticism directed at Kevin Spacey. Primarily this came from the consistent and overarching refusal to allow Spacey's "coming out" to be a distraction from his perpetration against Rapp. Many comments highlighted that choosing to come out as he was facing allegations of abuse was damaging to the LGBTQ community and welcomed an unfair correlation of LGBTQ identity to abuse perpetration. In an analysis of Kevin Spacey's Tweeted apology to Anthony Rapp, Enck (2018) noted the incongruence in the two paragraphs of his apology; the first paragraph contained his apology for the alleged abuse while the second revealed that he was now "living as a gay man." According to audiences, including the Facebook commenters analyzed in the present study, these disjointed points did not flow together. Many commenters, especially those from within the LGBTQ community, disavowed Spacey's "coming out," asserting that his alleged actions mattered more than his sexual identity.

This pattern was especially noteworthy because it goes against what has previously been seen in the literature. Due to widespread homophobic propaganda and media coverage there has been a societal misconception that gay men are more likely to be pedophiles. This can be seen in the ways that journalists are far more willing to describe assaults committed by adult men against young boys as gay or homosexual, whereas assaults against young girls committed by men are

never referred to as "heterosexual assaults" (Kitzinger, 2004). For example, just twenty years ago, gay male teachers were hesitant to reveal their sexual orientation in seeking employment due to prejudiced beliefs that "males who are close to children are gay or pedophiles" (Berrill & Martino, 2002). While these accusations have been proven false (Schlatter & Steinbeck, 2011) the effects of those allegations still remain in pockets of the world today. This unfavorable association affects LGBTQ people's everyday lives resulting in living "out" as a choice that could lead to further disenfranchisement.

In the present study, the denial of celebration for Spacey's coming out and the insistence that homosexuality is not equated with abusing children reveals how much U.S. society has shifted its perspectives on LGBTQ people and pedophilia. While perhaps thirty years ago public commentary on this case would equate the perpetrating of abuse to being gay, in contemporary times, United States citizens are more favorable to LGBTQ people. Over the last twenty years support for same-sex marriage has risen from 30% to 61% (Pew, 2019), and gay people can access many of the same public services available to their heterosexual counterparts. This shift in opinion could explain why the comparison of perpetrators to homosexuals was not seen in these Facebook comments. In some places gay men are largely assimilated into the dominant heterosexual society due to the belief that "gay people are just like everyone else," which may explain why Facebook commenters did not absolve Spacey of his wrongdoing through his apology (Berrill & Martino, 2002).

In the age of #MeToo there was a demand for accountability; therefore, a mediocre online apology followed by a "coming out" announcement was not enough retribution for the alleged crimes, according to some Facebook commenters. No longer were LGBTQ people advocating alone for equal treatment, allies to the movement were vocal as well, demanding that

LGBTQ people be treated the same way as heterosexual people. This means that if a perpetrator happens to be gay, that identity label is not conflated with the reason for abuse and further, that gay perpetrators need to be taken as seriously as any perpetrator in the age of #MeToo. In an ironic way this disavowance of an LGBTQ perpetrator reveals a change in societal perceptions of gay men. This shift points to growing acceptance and support for LGBTQ individuals in the United States and a hopeful future, leaving identity-based discrimination behind.

Comments Unrelated to the Article Content

The last major finding of the present study was that a portion of the Facebook users did not discuss the alleged assault between Rapp and Spacey but instead provided their opinions on Hollywood assaults in general, as largely seen in the general theme of trauma distancing. These comments contained negative feelings towards the institution of Hollywood and were largely apathetic, neither helping the survivor nor criticizing the perpetrator. Marked by a tone of indifference, the occurrence of this assault on Anthony Rapp did not seem to matter to these commenters. Their comments revolved around the othering of sexual violence to communities separate from their own, politicizing the event as a "liberal problem," making jokes about the event, and displaying overt suspicion of the entire #MeToo movement. Presently, there is little support for this trauma distancing in online commentary of new #MeToo stories in the literature; however, when looking at broader social group dynamics it is possible there are other ways to help explain this novel finding.

Of relation, through research on violent intergroup conflicts, it has been apparent that indifferent bystanders make crucial choices that affect heinous outcomes. It is these passive bystanders' acceptance of smaller acts, such as policy changes, that clear the way for more sweeping sanctions that, in the most extreme cases, can result in events such as mass killings and

genocide (Staub, 2014). The complicity for small acts of discrimination allows for stronger or swifter events to unfold which, in hindsight, seem like obvious warning signs of large-scale atrocities. In the present study, it is possible that Facebook commenters were comfortable as bystanders in this particular case, feeling more inclined to make comments on the overall state of affairs rather than the event itself. The avoidance of engagement with Anthony Rapp's case allows the commenters to both absolve themselves from taking a side and allow for other statements of perceived neutrality to exist. However, as apparent in literature on the bystander effect, complacency in the face of injustice only allows for further perpetration of harm to occur (Monroe, 2008). It is possible that in these continued conversations of sexual violence, due to the exposure of the #MeToo movement, commenters feel justified in being bystanders to the actual issues presented in these online articles. By not engaging deeply with the #MeToo disclosures as they surface, commenters are able to distance themselves from the realities of sexual violence in their own lives.

Strengths and limitations

There were many strengths to our empirical design including a large randomized sample size. Another strength of the present study was the researchers' internal validity. As a reliability check, researchers used a three-person coding team, separately coded each comment, then came up with agreed upon codes for all 99 comments. While qualitative analysis is subjective in its nature, by coming up with an agreed upon decision for the overlapping codes researchers allowed the analysis to be more objective, providing more internal validity to the study.

This study also had some limitations, as do many qualitative research studies. While using only the most interacted with comments helped control for sampling bias, this can also be considered a limitation due to the fact that the most interacted with comments on social media

posts may be negative because people are more willing engage with negative commentary and argue against it than they are to agree with a more positive comment. Within the comments, many users were removed from the research question and discussed sexual assault more generally, rather than the specific incident between Anthony Rapp and Kevin Spacey. While these comments demonstrate the nature of public reactions to gay male sexual violence in general, they do not answer our specific research question regarding response to Rapp's disclosure. Lastly, like all qualitative research, due to the subjective nature of the research our study is not generalizable. Findings from this research cannot be applied to the general population, but they do inspire new questions for future research.

Suggestions for future research

The present study invokes many new perspectives with which to pursue future research. One such analysis could compare comments across different social media platforms. Different forms of media attract people from different regions, generations, backgrounds, etc. Looking at comments across a variety of social media platforms would allow researchers to see how networking sites may influence the nature of user comments on cases of sexual assault. Researchers could also compare comments across different generations of people, such as users from the baby boomer generation versus millennial generation, and analyze how the #MeToo movement may have changed opinions on sexual violence and public reactions to sexual assault disclosures. This could be especially interesting due to millennials proximity to social media. Finally, researchers could conduct a series of studies to see how public perceptions differ across different cases of sexual assault based on identity, such as heterosexual male victims vs. gay male victims, transgender victims vs. cisgender victims, etc. Each of these suggestions would

help further the research on male survivors from an intersectional lens to look at the way public reactions differ for different male identities.

Study Implications

One of the most striking findings from our research was the representation of major themes across news sources in relation to their political affiliation. Of the five news sources, analysis of Fox News and Huffington Post revealed the most divisive commentary.

Fox News

From Fox News, a conservative publication, researchers expected comments to reflect victim blaming attitudes and support for the perpetrator. To researchers' surprise, rather than demonstrating victim blaming attitudes, Fox News included the most comments related to the theme of trauma distancing (*Figure 6*). Users most frequently commented on the culture of Hollywood instead of discussing the allegations between Rapp and Spacey. Many of the comments displayed negative attitudes toward Hollywood as an institution, with users describing it as liberal or democratic. Commenters specifically highlighted Hollywood being a world of its own, suggesting that whatever happens within Hollywood does not affect those on the outside. These commenters emphasized that the problem of sexual assault lies strictly within the sphere of Hollywood, and, therefore, is a solely democratic problem.

Comments from this news source were extremely representative of the current political climate and polarization between political parties, with many users emphasizing the distinction between democrats and republicans. These attitudes create an us versus them mentality where issues such as sexual violence are considered to be one person's problem rather than a deeper societal issue. Rather than discussing the deep-rooted issues within our cultural values that

perpetuate and allow sexual abuse to occur, blame is instead put solely onto the institution of Hollywood.

Huffington Post

As a liberal news source that's followed by predominantly millennial subscribers, researchers expected comments on Huffington Post to reflect sentiments of victim advocacy and solidarity. In reality, the comments sampled from Huffington Post produced some of the highest levels of both non-support of victim(s) and perpetrator support (*Figure 3* & *Figure 4*). Researchers speculate that these findings could, in part, be related to Kevin Spacey's affiliation with the democratic party. As a beloved liberal actor, Spacey garnered sympathy from fellow party members who chose not only to excuse his actions and publicly support his borderline apathetic response to Rapp's allegations, but also to engage in victim blaming and stigma perpetuation. In essence, rather than mirroring the progressive nature of democratic policies and beliefs, Huffington Post's responses can be characterized as malicious and derogatory, thus preserving the culture of victim-silencing.

These implications reveal what might be intuitive to anyone who regularly engages with online platforms like Facebook. When someone chooses only to survey news sources that conflate with their own political identity, the commentary on message boards and posts can become a vacuum of repeated and isolated ideology. By reading and discussing articles with those that agree with one's political leaning, individuals are not exposed to differing opinions or forced to reconcile their own opinions with those different than their own.

Conclusion

Through the present study, it is apparent that public perceptions of male sexual assault disclosure are varied and complex. Unlike the experiences of white, female survivors who are

largely embraced in public commentary, male victims do not benefit from the same levels of support in their experiences of trauma and abuse. By expanding these #MeToo conversations to include women of color, LGBTQ populations, and male survivors, the most marginalized individuals in society can be embraced and supported in their healing. In the words of the #MeToo founder Tarana Burke, "... sexual violence knows no race, class, or gender, but the response to it does… Ending sexual violence [and harassment] will require every voice from every corner of the world and it will require those whose voices are most often heard to find ways to amplify those voices that often go unheard" (Onwuachi-Willig, 2018).

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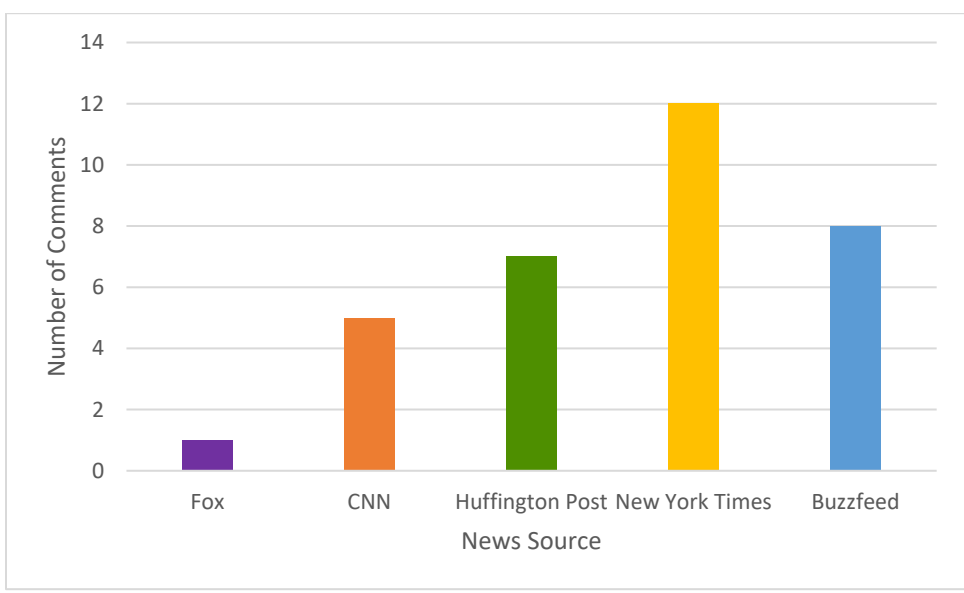
Appendix

Figures

Figure 1

Visual Map of Themes and Sub-themes
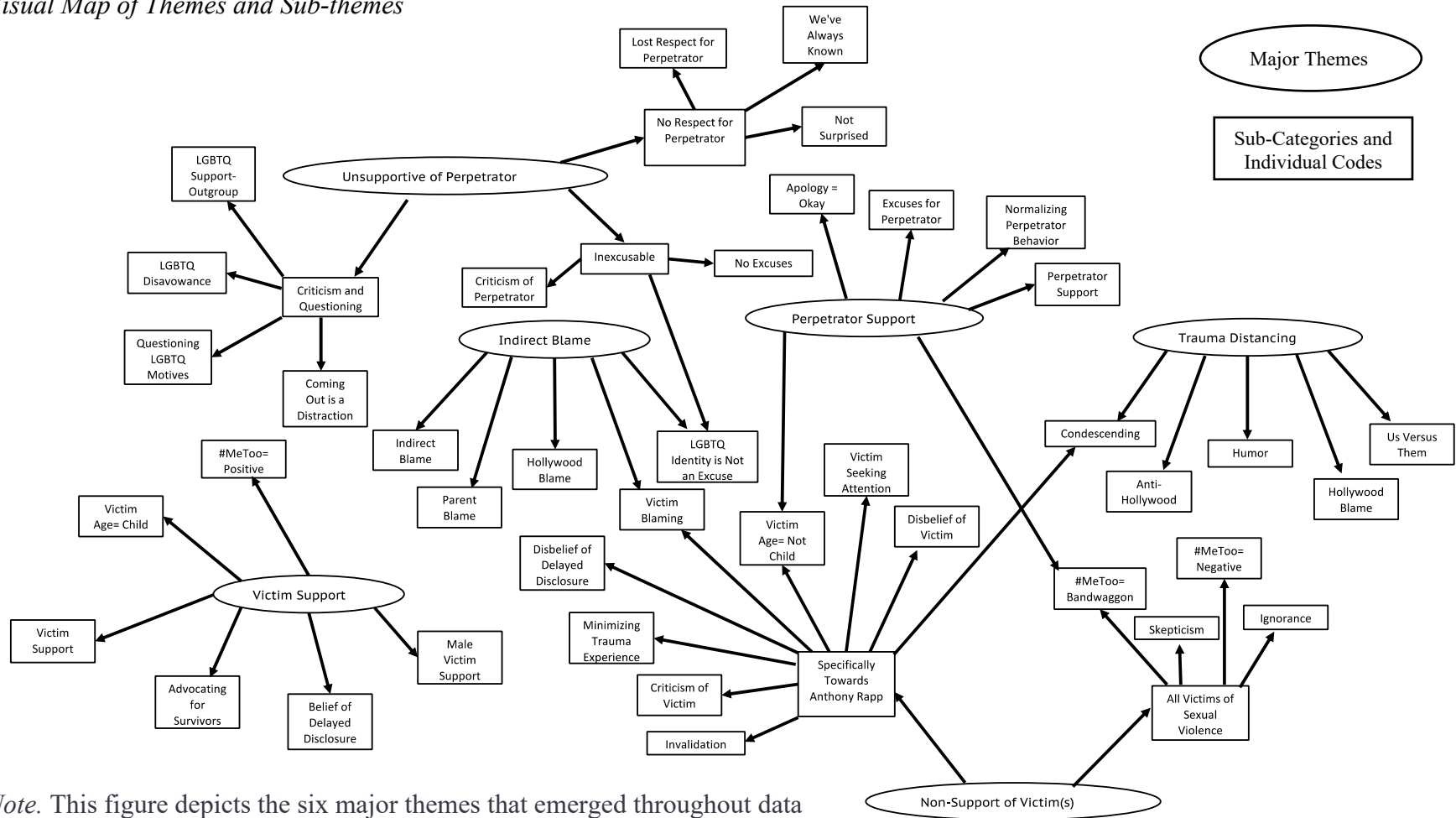
Note. This figure depicts the six major themes that emerged throughout data analysis and includes all 50 codes as they relate to each theme and sub-category.
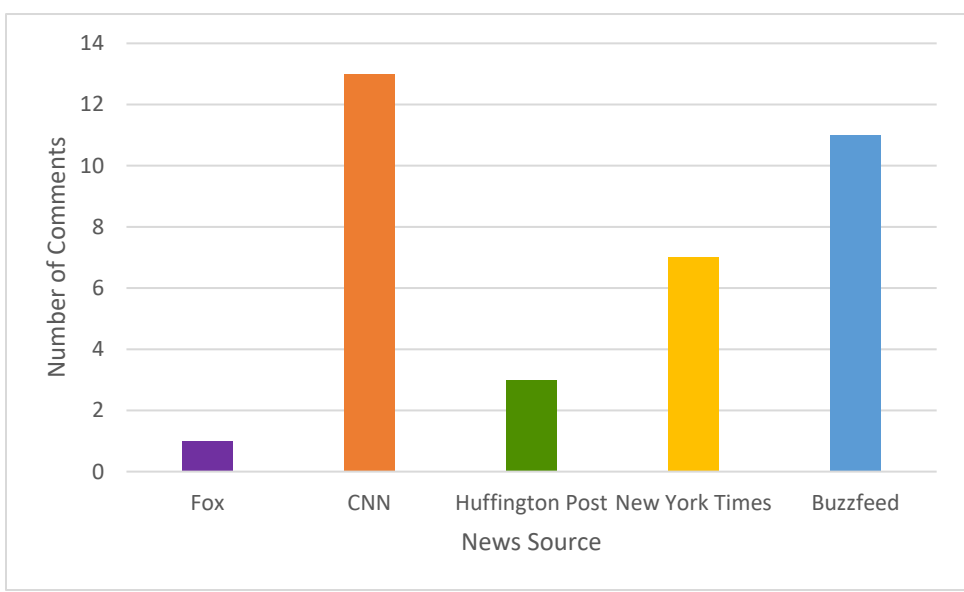
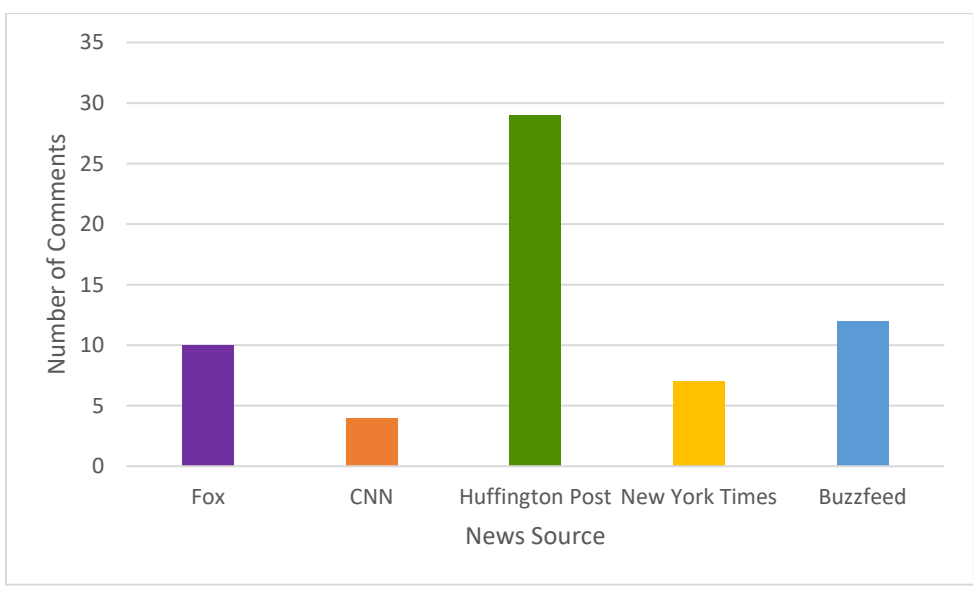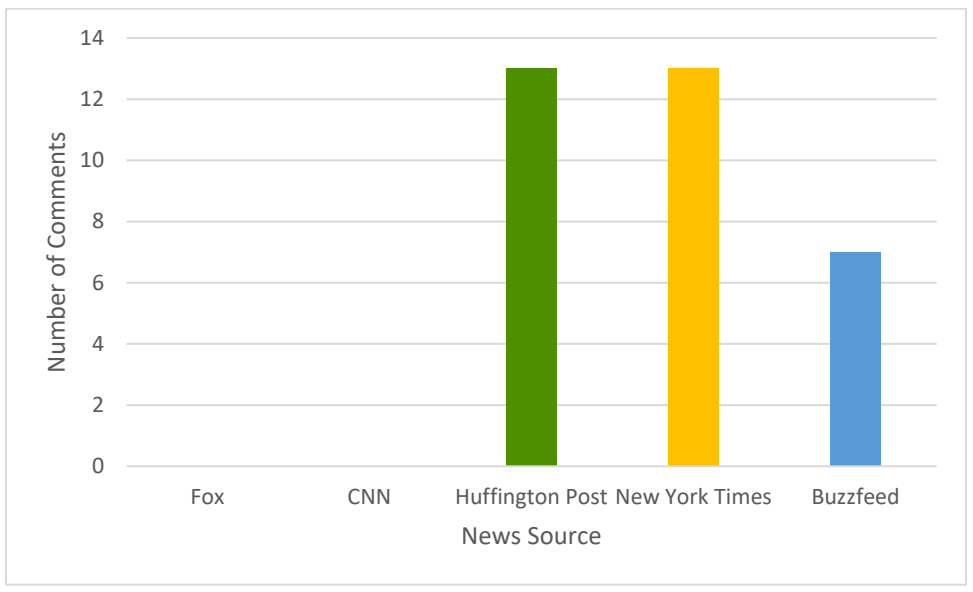**Figure 2**

Number of Comments Coded as Indirect Blame

  Note. This figure depicts the number of codes assigned to comments within each news source for the theme of Indirect Blame.

Figure 3

Number of Comments Coded as Victim Support

  Note. This figure depicts the number of codes assigned to comments within each news source for the theme of Victim Support.

Figure 4

Number of Comments Coded as Non-Support of Victim

Note. This figure depicts the number of codes assigned to comments within each news source for the theme of Non-Support of Victim.
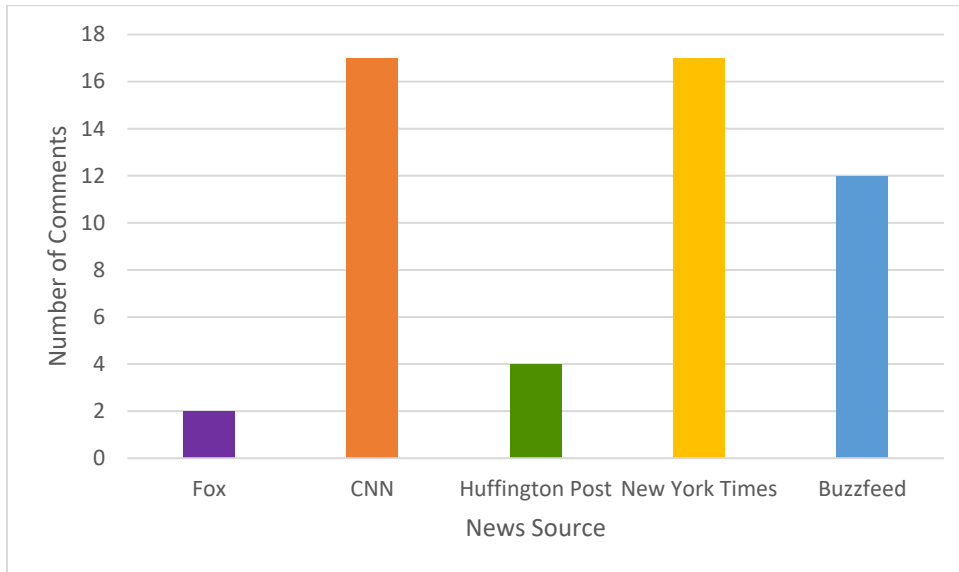
Figure 5

Number of Comments Coded as Perpetrator Support

Note. This figure depicts the number of codes assigned to comments within each news source for the theme of Perpetrator Support.
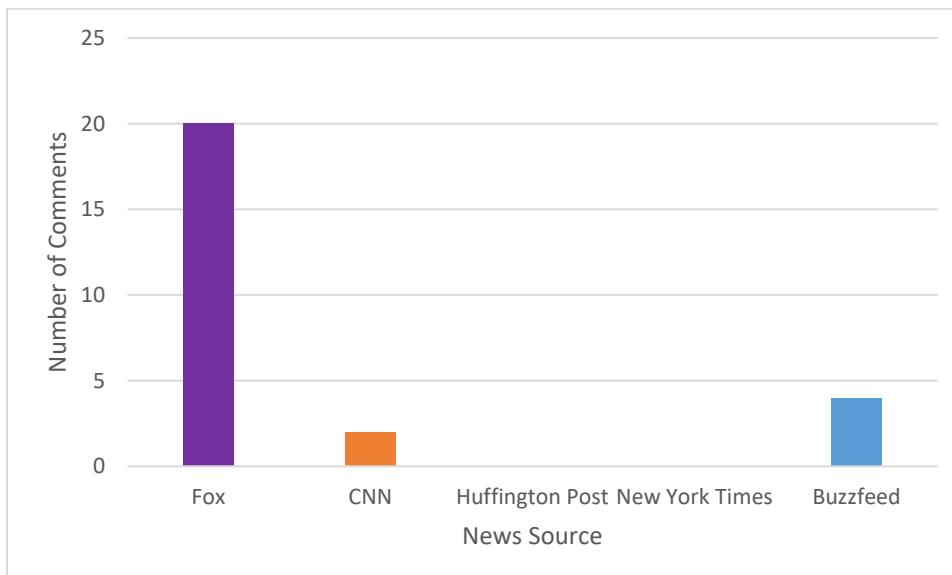
Figure 6

*Number of Comments Coded as Non-Support of Perpetrator*

Note. This figure depicts the number of codes assigned to comments within each news source for the theme of Non-Support of Perpetrator.

Figure 7

Number of Comments Coded as Trauma Distancing

Note. This figure depicts the number of codes assigned to comments within each news source for the theme of Trauma Distancing.

Figure 8

Distribution of Major Themes Across News Sources
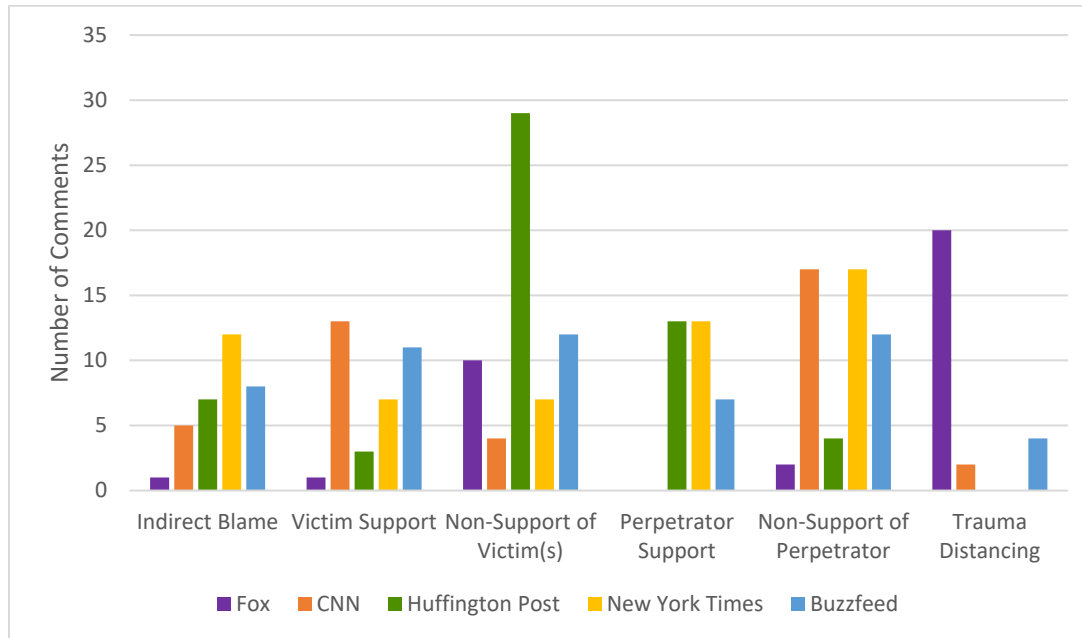
Note. This figure represents the distribution of the six major themes across all major news sources.

Data

See attached PDF titled: PSY 451 Data Redacted to reference data