

TITLE: “She asked for it” The support for and normalization of sexual assault against women

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Introduction: Sexual assault is any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the consent of the recipient. Approximately 1 in 5 women report experiencing sexual assault during their lifetime. Previous research reveals that stronger beliefs in traditional masculine roles are associated with greater acceptance of rape myths. Also, acceptance of traditional masculine roles is associated with negative perceptions of sexual assault victims. Our study examines the themes associated with people’s responses to firsthand accounts of sexual assault perpetration.

Purpose: The majority of past research on sexual assault provides information about either the perpetrator or victim. The purpose of our study is to explore reactions to firsthand accounts of sexual assault among the Reddit community.

Methods: We obtained data from Reddit.com, an anonymous online social news and discussion forum. The comments we analyzed were Redditors’ online responses to perpetrators’ accounts of sexual assault. Using thematic analysis, we coded for patterns with those responses. Fifty-seven comments were analyzed for this project.

Results: Themes that emerged from the commenters’ responses were the (1) normalization and (2) explicit acceptance of sexual assault against women and various rape myths. In this context, normalization refers to beliefs and attitudes about sexual assault that become cultural practices or customs of what is expected. Explicit support refers to any expression that shows acceptance for sexual assault.

Conclusion: This qualitative study provides information to further educate people on the reality of sexual assault against women. These findings go beyond the risk factors and outcomes for victims and perpetrators to help us understand third-party individuals’ reactions to descriptions of sexual assault. This helps us to understand social norms regarding sexual assault, which might ultimately help build more effective prevention programs.

Recommendations: These findings represent the first step in a bottom-up approach to developing more effective social interventions to reduce sexual assault. These interventions may involve community organizations and sexual assault prevention advocates. Such programs may aim to decrease acceptance of rape myths or increase awareness about sexual assault.

Keywords: sexual assault, normalization, support, qualitative, online community