

Social Media and Sexual Assault: The Impact of Rape Myths on Constructions of Sexual Assault  
on Twitter

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## Abstract

### Social Media and Sexual Assault: The Impact of Rape Myths on Constructions of Sexual Assault on Twitter

In the fall of 2014, Jian Ghomeshi, host of CBC's *Q*, was accused of sexual assault and harassment by a number of women. The women who came forward were criticized for the delay in reporting the incidents. As a response, two female Canadian journalists started the hashtag #beenrapedneverreported as a way of using networked media to foster alternative dialogue about sexual assault, ostensibly so women who have experienced rape could control the conversation and say how they understood their own experiences. The literature on sexual assault suggests that discussions of rape involving members of the general public are shaped by myths that foster victim blame and lead to survivors being silenced about the assault. I decided to look at whether or not posters created an alternative discourse around rape by comparing constructions of rape on the hashtag with the common rape myths present in mainstream conversations. I employed a social constructionist lens to approach the data to allow for multiple interpretations of these myths and to explore the way posters discussed sexual assault. In particular, I conducted a qualitative content analysis of 8250 tweets that were posted to the hashtag between October 30, 2014 and June 26, 2016. The findings indicate that each myth identified in the literature was reproduced in the discussion, suggesting that they continue to have salience in the ways that all people, including victims, understand rape as a crime. A number of posters accepted the myths and used them to construct their own understanding of why their rape was not reportable because they felt that it was their fault. This suggests that there is still a long way to go to challenge these myths as they are internalized by some survivors. However, most posters reproduced the myths to explain how the attitudes were mobilized against them by others, in effect, silencing them.

This created an alternative discussion of how social assumptions work against female victims of rape at a variety of levels. These assumptions occur not only within policing agencies and the criminal justice system but also within family and friend support networks. A smaller proportion of posters actively contested the myths primarily through discussions surrounding consent. In particular, sexual assault was construed as denying women their agency to choose what happens to their body and rape was constructed as a loss of agency/autonomy. Posters put forward that women have a right to control their own body and that choice/control is taken away by the rapist. From this perspective, rape is not a sexual crime but a violent crime that denies human agency/personhood of the victim. This suggests that the consent debate is a key moment of feminist politics and this transgressive construction of rape upends the social assumptions about female and male sexuality.

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## **Chapter One- Introduction:**

In October 2014, Jian Ghomeshi, a radio personality who hosted ‘Q’ on CBC radio, was accused of sexually assaulting several women and as a consequence his employment with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) was quietly terminated. In response, Ghomeshi wrote a Facebook post addressing the accusations stating that the sex was consensual and that any physical contact occurred because he and his partners enjoyed sexual activities that included Bondage and Discipline/Dominance and Submission/Sadism and Masochism (BDSM). He did not apologize for his behaviour but maintained his innocence and suggested that the women who came forward with accusations were trying to ruin his reputation (Calabrese, 2014).

This sentiment that a woman coming forward to accuse a man of sexual assault with the intent of ruining his reputation is not unique to the Ghomeshi case but represents a trend of focusing on the impact the accusations have on the alleged perpetrator. This was also illustrated when an anonymous woman came forward to accuse Aziz Ansari, an actor, writer and director, of sexual assault. Rather than focusing on the incident itself, some commentators argued that these accusations were unfortunate, not for the impact they had on the woman but because Ansari’s career could be deeply impacted by the allegation (Flanagan, 2018).

The public learned the details of the accusations brought against Jian Ghomeshi when interviews with the three complainants were published in the Toronto Star (2014a). The women indicated that Ghomeshi had physically assaulted them and had been verbally abusive; one interviewee indicated that Ghomeshi told her, “I want to hate f—k you”. The women stipulated that the assaults had occurred previously, a number of years ago, but that none of them had filed any police reports. The women indicated that they did not report their assault because they were fearful that they might experience retaliation either by being sued or targeted by trolls online

(Donovan & Brown, 2014a). This is consistent with literature that reports that survivors are silent after a sexual assault because they are concerned that if they come forward they will not be believed or they will be blamed for the assault (Ullman, 2010).

After the story broke, more women came forward to accuse Ghomeshi of sexual assault/harassment. As details from the assaults continued to surface, pundits argued that the behaviour he was exhibiting was not new but had been covered up and explained away by his employer for many years. Rather than addressing Ghomeshi's behaviour, the CBC told female staff members to work things out with him as he was the star of the show (Donovan & Brown, 2014b). Covering up behaviour of powerful men is not unique to the CBC, but has been a practice for some time. It is just recently that cases like Ghomeshi have started to come forward. For example, co-host of NBC's Today show Matt Lauer, comedian Bill Cosby, CBS/ABS host Bill O'Reilly and movie producer Harvey Weinstein have all had accusations come out years after the initial incidents in spite of the fact that women had spoken out against them in the past.

In response to the apparent unwillingness on the part of some members of the public to believe the women when they came forward to accuse Jian Ghomeshi of sexual assault, two female journalists, Sue Montgomery of the Montreal Gazette and Antonia Zerbisias of the Toronto Star, started a discussion on Facebook Messenger about the creation of a hashtag on Twitter. The intention of the hashtag was to start a conversation about why survivors do not come forward and why people have difficulties believing survivors when they do. In the Facebook posts, that they screenshot and shared on Twitter, they indicated that the hashtag would create an alternative discourse where survivors could share, in their own words, why they did not report their assault. On October 30, 2014, both women tweeted using the hashtag #beenrapedneverreported. The hashtag went viral and quickly spread across the globe.

The incredible response to the hashtag is an important example of women using Twitter to reclaim their voice and break the silence around sexual assault. Moreover, it is not an isolated example. The hashtag #yesallwomen, for example, began in response to a mass killing that was targeted against women in California. The perpetrator, Elliot Rodger, had posted a video on YouTube condemning young women for rejecting his advances (Rosenberg, 2014). At the time, the hashtag #Notallmen was being used to deflect attention away from men's sexual violence, using the 'not all men' argument as a defense against feminist arguments that sexual violence is primarily perpetrated by men. Female Twitter users created a hashtag to discuss sexual violence and misogyny by flipping the hashtag from #Notallmen to #yesallwomen to reflect the widespread gendered violence women experience.

The hashtag #WhenIWas was part of the Everyday Sexism Project that was founded by British journalist Laura Bates. The hashtag was launched to support a broader feminist initiative to draw attention to the sexual harassment girls experience on a daily basis. The tweets also illuminated what women were told in their youth about 'controlling' their bodies because they were 'distracting' to the opposite sex (Sanghani, 2015). The hashtag also provided a space for women to discuss past experiences from their youth that they had not shared. It also allowed posters to challenge the negative and disempowering messages they had received at a young age about sexual harassment.

The hashtag #ShePersisted continued the trend of using Twitter to create spaces for women to share their stories, support each other and break their silence. It began in response to the United States Senate vote to silence Elizabeth Warren for her objection to the confirmation of Senator Jeff Sessions as the United States Attorney General. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said this phrase in an effort to shift blame to Warren for disrupting the session

(Victor, 2017). It also intentionally played on the feminist moniker of ‘nevertheless, she persisted’, used to highlight women pushing past barriers in order for their voices to be heard despite initially being ignored.

The desire to break the silence and reclaim women’s voices was also apparent with the hashtag #NastyWomen. The hashtag started in 2016 because Donald Trump described Hilary Clinton as a ‘nasty woman’. The comment was meant to discount her voice; however, women reclaimed the term and transformed it into a feminist rallying cry to challenge the negative connotation with the term ‘nasty’. The hashtag became an important part of offline activism, especially during the Women’s March on Washington (Woolf, 2016).

Most recently, the hashtag #MeToo was created by women in the United States in support of women who came forward to accuse Harvey Weinstein, a powerful movie producer in Hollywood, of sexual assault and harassment. Importantly, the women first came forward on social media with the accusations and used the #MeToo hashtag to encourage other women to break the silence around their experiences of sexual assault. Although the initial conversation started around Harvey Weinstein, it has since grown to include other celebrity men who have been accused of sexual assault and harassment and to illustrate the systemic problem that exists within the movie industry. The conversation has expanded to become a broader dialogue about what constitutes sexual assault and harassment. Importantly, the hashtag is a space for women to discuss sexual assault and to question taken for granted ‘acceptable’ behaviour exhibited by men.

As such, Twitter is an important medium used by women to start feminist conversations generally, and to discuss sexual assault specifically. The conversations on the various hashtags provide an opportunity to examine how women construct the meaning of sexual assault and understand their experiences of gendered violence. This thesis is based on an analysis of the

posts on the hashtag #beenrapedneverreported. #beenrapedneverreported was selected in particular because, although the conversation was global (with a high degree of participation from the United States in particular), it engaged a large number of Canadian women and girls and generated a great deal of discussion in Canadian news media. It also quickly became a key point of inquiry for public discussions about sexual assault; notably, the Huffington Post published tweets from the hashtag on its front page (Huffington Post, 2014). As such, it is a useful moment for Canadian criminologists to examine the kinds of conversations female survivors have when they use social media to gain access to public debate and ‘break the silence’ around gendered violence.

### Thesis Outline

I start the thesis with a review of the empirical research on attitudes about sexual assault and rape. The literature identified that sexual assault became an area of inquiry for researchers, especially because there was a gap between the number of reported incidents of sexual assault to the police and the number of assaults reported in crime victimization surveys. To explain this gap, researchers identified the impact that commonly held inaccurate beliefs about rape (called ‘rape myths’ in the literature) had on conceptualizations of sexual assault. I then explore women’s resistance to rape myths. Lastly, given the calls in the feminist literature to create alternative spaces for women to articulate their own understandings of sexual assault, I review the literature that examines social media as a space to generate women-centric conversations about sexual assault.

In the third chapter I outline the methodological considerations for the project. I used a qualitative content analysis because it allows the researcher to systematically organize and analyze text-based data. It was also consistent with other feminist studies that chose qualitative

means to better understand the rich meanings that women mobilize when they speak for themselves. The method is rooted in the broader constructivist paradigm; this approach was particularly relevant to my inquiry because it posits multiple versions of the truth, and enabled me to explore how the posters constructed these multiple meanings through their social interaction with each other. However, the constructionist position I adopt for the present research assumes that there is a reality out there that the researcher can be made aware of as I intended to get a better understanding of how women talk about and understand sexual assault and harassment.

Employing a constructivist paradigm rather than a critical paradigm for the research may raise concerns for feminists as dominant constructions related to sexual assault have historically drowned out female voices and obscured women's realities. This concern was mitigated by focusing on tweets posted only by women<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, the assumption for the research is that the construction of the meaning of rape is a social and collective process. Therefore, the focus of the research is on tweets and whether or not alternative discourses (discourses that subvert mainstream understandings) are understood through the previous literature on rape myths. Specifically, I sought to determine whether the tweets reconstituted rape myths or whether they created an alternative construction that challenged the myths.

In the fourth chapter, I report my findings. The chapter is organized around each of the ten myths identified in the literature. Throughout the analysis, it is clear that some posters simply restated the myths, which suggests that some survivors decide not to report an assault because they have internalized the myth and see themselves as at fault for the assault. However, the

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<sup>1</sup> Since there is no guarantee with respect to the gender of posters, I selected posters who presented themselves as female in their name, pronouns and/or profile picture.

majority of posters either called others (including police officers, family members, and friends) to account for using myths against them to silence them or provided an alternative construction of sexual assault as a violation of agency. The alternative constructions relied heavily on notions of consent and argued that women must be recognized as agents with full control over their own bodies. This was understood as men accepting 'no' as 'no' and requiring men to go beyond 'no' to obtain a 'yes'.

The fifth chapter concludes the thesis. In this chapter I review the key findings and discuss how the project has advanced criminological understandings of sexual assault as a social construction.

## **Chapter Two – Literature Review:**

This chapter begins with an overview of how early feminists in the 1960s and 1970s brought sexual assault into the public sphere (Brownmiller, 1975; Buchwald, Fletcher & Roth, 1993; Walklate, 1995). This background provides the basis for discussing the advent of rape myths and the requisite research on the subject. In particular, feminist scholars identified ten rape myths, or commonly held misconceptions about sexual assault that serve to silence female victims; each is explored below. I then turn to a broader discussion about sexual assault. For example, it introduced the notion of date rape to combat the misconception that most rapists are strangers, and significantly shifted the definition of consent from ‘no means no’ to the need for affirmative consent. Finally, I explore literature that argues that online media can help promote feminist activism and provide spaces for alternative and resistive discussions that challenge mainstream misconceptions about sexual assault.

### **Challenging Sexual Assault**

Before the 1960s, sexual assault was considered a private matter, as such, it was not mentioned publically and was not viewed as a problem (Brownmiller, 1975; Freedman, 2013). In the 1960s, given women’s increased participation in the labour force and the fact they subsequently occupied more space in the public sphere, scholars and activists alike began to talk about rape as a public harm. This shift was further spurred by young women’s experiences with the sexual revolution in the 1970s. In particular, sexual assault was framed as infringing upon women’s equality rights and their ability to engage in the public sphere (Brownmiller, 1975; Buchwald et al., 1993; Walklate, 1995).

There was a lack of consensus at the time about how to approach the issue of sexual assault. Liberal feminists individualized the issue as only impacting victims and offenders. In contrast, radical feminists saw rape as a social problem rooted in women's role in society (Taylor, 2009). In particular, radical feminists argued that rape should not be constructed as unwanted sex; instead it should be understood as an extension of men's power and control over women and their sexuality (Dworkin, 1981). Although the theorization of sexual assault focused on patriarchy, power and violence (Bumiller, 2008), there was still a lack of consensus among feminists with regards to the meaning of rape and accordingly the kinds of solutions women needed to protect themselves from sexual assault.

Nonetheless, feminist activism successfully brought about changes to the criminal justice system to address the issue of sexual assault. In the 1960s, there were changes to the requirement that women 'actively'<sup>2</sup> resist men's sexual advances using extreme measures in order to support a rape charge (Estrich, 1987). It was hoped this would increase the conviction rate and provide a deterrent for offenders. However, despite the changes to the law, there continued to be a gap between the number of assaults reported to the police and the number of assaults recorded in self-report crime victimization studies (Brown & Walklate, 2012; Horvath & Brown, 2009). This seems to suggest that women were not coming forward when they were assaulted.

This finding indicated that there were factors beyond the criminal justice system impacting survivors (Brown & Walklate, 2012; Horvath & Brown, 2009). In particular, research has indicated that if a survivor experiences a negative social reaction from friends, family and professionals (i.e. doctors) when they disclose an assault, they are more likely to stay silent about

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<sup>2</sup> The term actively refers to women clearly saying 'no' or using their body to physically resist the perpetrator.

the assault in the future. Moreover, if the survivor feels like there would be a negative social reaction if she were to come forward, the survivor is more likely to stay silent (Brown & Walklate, 2012). Therefore, there are barriers for women coming forward even before they speak with the police. In addition, researchers found that even when women did report a rape, their cases were often dropped at various stages throughout the criminal justice process: police investigations were often closed because officers reported a claim as ‘unfounded’; Crown Attorneys were more likely to drop sexual assault charges than other types of crime; and there was a low rate of conviction when cases did go to trial (Brown & Walklate, 2012; Horvath & Brown, 2009).

As a result, researchers began to examine why women do not report and why there was case attrition in the criminal justice system. Scholars theorized that it was a structural problem that stemmed from women’s and men’s place in society. In particular, there was a presumption that there are gender roles that dictate expected behaviours for men and women which are built upon scripts that men and women are required to act out (Horvath & Brown, 2009). These gender roles foster social attitudes about gender and sexuality, and promote stereotypic behaviour that structures sexual assault as a form of gendered violence. These stereotypes create justifications for blaming survivors of sexual assault when they do not behave in ways that fall in line with prescribed gender roles (Frese, 2004; Ryan, 2011). Because of this, research began to focus on the myths, or social misconceptions, about who gets raped and why.

### Patriarchal Assumptions and Rape Myths

Researchers have argued that the high rates of sexual assault experienced by women is the result of broader structural forces. Particularly, they point to patriarchy, a social system that presents male domination within society as ‘natural’ (DeKeseredy, 2011). Cultural norms that

govern men and women's positions in society allow men to believe that women should be in inferior positions and importantly allow women to also believe that this situation is permissible (DeKeseredy, 2011; Breger, 2014). Thus, gendered norms and stereotypes facilitate patriarchal ideology within interactions between men and women (Breger, 2014).

Some scholars use the term 'rape culture' to describe the high prevalence and social acceptance of sexual violence against women. Arguably, rape myths are dominant discourses present within patriarchal societies that allow rape culture to continue. The myths operate by shifting the blame for sexual assault on to women; thus, men's dominance over women is not questioned as it is women's behaviour that is put under the microscope. These myths then become internalized beliefs that normalize sexual assault and allow it to continue (Buchwald et al., 1993; Ullman, 2010; Breger, 2014).

Brownmiller's seminal study, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (Brownmiller, 1975), criticized the disbelief women are met by when they come forward to discuss rape and argued that "rape is a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear". Thus, she challenged the general tendency at the time to privilege the need to defend the perpetrator against accusations of sexual assault over the needs of the victim. This shift was supported by the emergence of research that explored how taken for granted conceptions of sexual assault were based on underlying myths surrounding rape.

Burt (1980) defined rape myths as "prejudicial, stereotyped and false beliefs about rape, rape victims and rapists" (p.217). Burt also identified four categories of these myths: victims are blamed for their rape; others do not believe victims when they claim they have been raped; the myth has the effect of exonerating the perpetrator; and only certain types of women are raped (Burt, 1980). The specific types of women were not identified. However, further research in this

area clarified this definition. For example, Bohner defined rape myths as “descriptive or prescriptive beliefs about rape (i.e. about its causes, context, consequences, perpetrators, victims and their interaction) that serve to deny, downplay or justify sexual violence that men commit against women” (Bohner, 1998: 14). These myths make it difficult for women to come forward and make others doubt their story when they disclose.

More recent scholarship has expanded these early general categories of rape myths to narrow the concept to indicate specific misconceptions and to identify how these misconceptions impact the treatment of survivors. Much of this research has focused on the degree of acceptance of these myths (Bohner et al., 1998; Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999). Studies on rape myth acceptance began through analyses of the degree to which the general population adheres to these myths (Frese, 2004; Krahe, 1991). The studies used vignettes to present a situation that is impacted by a myth. For example, a man and a woman have sex after they have gone out for drinks together (Basow & Minieri, 2011). The researchers then used questionnaires to determine if the situation described was considered sexual assault and, if so, how much blame was attributed to the victim in the scenario (Basow & Minieri, 2011; Horvath & Brown, 2009). Studies on rape myths have also explored the impact of rape myth acceptance on jury decision making (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). They have also targeted particular populations. In particular, college age students have been studied to determine the impact of ‘hook-up’ culture on rape myth acceptance and attribution of blame (Deming, Covan, Swan, & Bilings, 2013). Importantly, these studies allowed participants to respond to the scenario and provide their view on the vignettes. However, there has been little research to date that has allowed women to describe their experiences outside of rape myth constructs (Bohner et

al., 1998; Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Payne et al., 1999). I now turn to a discussion of the content of the most common rape myths identified in the literature.

Myth: Sexual assault occurs when a male perpetrator assaults a female victim. Accordingly, perpetrators are male and victims are female.

The myth that men cannot be sexually assaulted and women do not commit sexual assault is based upon a heteronormative conceptualization of sexual assault. As such, sexual assault has been construed as a sexual act involving a woman's vagina and a male penis. This has limited sexual assault to instances of sex that occur with a male perpetrator and a female victim (Jordan, 2004; Malinen, 2012). Therefore, a sexual assault has only happened when a man's penis enters a woman's vagina without her consent (Jordan, 2004).

Although there has been some research on male survivors of sexual assault (Cohen, 2014; Graham, 2006; Javaid, 2014), male victims have typically not been considered and are not included in broader discussions of sexual assault (Newburn & Stanko, 1995). Therefore, little research on the subject of male rape has been conducted and that has resulted in a dearth of theorization in comparison to female rape (Javaid, 2014). The work that has been done has focused on homosexual men and has depicted male rape as 'gay' (Graham, 2006). Although there is some literature that identifies sexual assault as a crime that is experienced by people of all genders, research on rape of men and gender non-conforming individuals is uncommon.

For the purposes of understanding the low rate of reporting among female victims, the myth reinforces the notion that women are by definition victims of men and do not have sexual agency (Newburn & Stanko, 1995; Bunch, 2006). This creates a misunderstanding that women who do not forcefully say 'no' are consenting to sex (Gracia, 2004; Randall, 2010).

### Myth: Victims lie about being sexually assaulted

The myth that women are the only group that can be sexual assault victims have impacted other myths as this frames their conceptualization. In particular, the research on the myth that victims lie about being sexually assaulted places the focus upon the female victim and her behaviour leaving the male perpetrator absent from the conversation. The victim is the focus and her credibility to tell the truth is what is analyzed. There is a preconceived notion that the victim is not seen as a credible witness because of the assumption that she is lying about the sexual assault (Randall, 2010).

This myth plays out in survivors' interactions with police officers. The police assume that a high number of reported sexual assaults are unfounded (Jordan, 2004; Quinlan, 2016). This switches the polices' focus from an investigation to find the perpetrator to an investigation to determine the veracity of the complainants' claims. For example, some investigative techniques interrogate the survivor because it is assumed that, if she is telling the truth, then her story will always be consistent; the police probe the story to ensure that it is truthful (Quinlan, 2016). Therefore, this myth is depicted in the literature as impacting her credibility within the criminal justice system (Jordan, 2004; Quinlan, 2016).

### Myth: Sexual assault is committed by a stranger (in a dark alley).

A female victim's credibility is also impacted by the myth that 'real rape' is committed by a stranger (Monson, Byrd & Langhinrchson-Rohling, 1996); this is particularly problematic, as research has continually identified acquaintance rape as more common than stranger rape (Deming et al., 2013). The credibility of survivors of acquaintance rape is challenged because the perpetrator does not fall into the expected pattern. Because of this, people often do not believe

acquaintance rape survivors when they are told about the assault. This myth has also been found to make it more difficult for others to consider instances of acquaintance rape sexual assault (Mason & Monckton-Smith, 2008; O'Hara, 2012).

Importantly, research indicates that this myth is internalized by survivors because when they are asked about a scenario that outlines an acquaintance rape, they will not label the incident as rape (Deming et al., 2013). This same viewpoint was also found to be present in research that analyzed reactions from courts, police, family and friends told about the assault. In each context individuals found it difficult to believe the survivor and concluded that it was not a 'real rape' because it was not a stranger (Ullman, 2010). As a result, the myth provided justification to blame the survivor for the assault (Bell, Kuriloff & Lottes, 1994).

For example, some judges continue to use outdated modes of what husbands should be permitted to do within marriage (Randall, 2006). Women who are raped by intimate partners are often interpreted as always consenting to sex because they are in a relationship and, as such, their credibility is reduced because they are not seen as victims of 'real rape'. This treatment is important as the internalization of the myth by judges influences the verdict of the case (Randall, 2010) which in turn provides an incentive to survivors to not report.

Myth: Sexual assault is just sex (i.e. it is not violence).

As with the myth that sexual assault is committed by a stranger and therefore only strangers sexually assault, the myth that sexual assault is just sex suggests that an assault has only happened if there is violence in addition to the act of rape itself. The myth explains away the sexual assault as merely sex and therefore not an aggressive or violent act (Benedict, 1992; O'Hara, 2012). Feminists have deconstructed this myth by looking at the power imbalance

between women and men (Russo & Pirlott, 2006). It is argued that men will use violence to keep their power by exerting control through all forms of gender-based violence, including rape (Davies & True, 2015; Russo & Pirlott, 2006).

The myth has also encouraged members of the criminal justice system to look at the sexual attractiveness of the perpetrator and the survivor to determine whether or not an assault has occurred. Perpetrators who are seen as physically attractive are perceived as less harassing than their less attractive counterparts and more likely to be a desirable partner for the survivor; because of this, jurors are less likely to convict attractive perpetrators (Angelone, Mitchell & Carola, 2009). In like vein, in a mock jury decision-making study, participants were asked to determine guilt and sentence attractive and unattractive defendants. The study found that unattractive defendants received a harsher sentence even when the evidence supporting the conviction was weaker (Erian, Lin, Patel, Neal & Geiselman, 1998). Additionally, juries tend to assume that women are willing to endure more harassment if the perpetrator is attractive. Perpetrators who are attractive and have high social standing are still viewed more positively than unattractive low-status individuals even after the women have been harassed (Angelone et al., 2009). Therefore, perpetrators who are considered to be ‘more desirable’ to have sex with are more likely not to be convicted and/or punished for their assault.

Studies conducted on the attractiveness of the survivor have found mixed results. Erian, Lin, Patel, Neal & Geiselman (1998) report that if the victim was attractive, the defendant received a harsher sentence. DeJong (1999) similarly found that there is a presumption that more attractive people are more easily seen to be victims of sexual assault because they are more sexually desirable. However, some studies have attributed more responsibility to attractive survivors, on the assumption that, because she is attractive, she has more sexual experience, as

such; she should have acted more responsibly and not been so careless or provocative. In this vein, Clarke & Stermac's (2011) study found that thin women were more likely to be blamed for their rape than overweight women because thin women are depicted as more attractive than overweight women. Nonetheless, these findings contrast with other studies that report that people are more likely to blame an unattractive woman as she is assumed to have seduced her attacker into having sex with her because she is seen as 'less desirable' (DeJong, 1999). The myth that sexual assault is sex and not violence impacts those who are deemed to be more sexually desirable as this influences people's perceptions of responsibility and blame for the assault.

Myth: If the victim drinks alcohol (or takes drugs) then that is consent to sexual relations

Both the myth that sexual assault is just sex and the myth that when victims drink they consent to sex places responsibility for the assault on the survivor. The myth that if the victim drinks alcohol then she has consented to sexual relations is based upon the belief that if a woman is intoxicated in the presence of people of the opposite sex, then she is at fault for whatever happens because she should have known not to get drunk (Benedet, 2010). The literature discusses the impact the myth has on constructions of consent and the impact this construction has on survivors' credibility (Burt, 1980a; Horvath & Brown, 2009b; O'Hara, 2012).

This myth was reflected in an analysis of the police's determination of victim credibility. In particular, police associated alcohol use with lower credibility when it came to determining whether or not the survivor consented. This myth has continued despite legal reforms that require affirmative consent, as survivors are seen as credible only if they are responsible and avoid risk (Randall, 2010). When victims drink they are viewed as improperly managing risk and are thus to blame for the assault as they are seen as 'asking for it' (Freeman, Wegner, Abbey, Pierce, Pegram, & Woerner, 2015). Victim responsibility and credibility are linked in that if the incident

is viewed as the survivor's fault then the claim is less credible. This, in turn impacts the likelihood of the charges being unfounded.

Sperry and Siegel (2013) found that participants attributed more responsibility to the victim if she took substances i.e. drugs and alcohol willingly before the assault. This blame is not extended to the perpetrator as his alcohol use absolves him of responsibility because men are supposed to be less inhibited when they drink; they blame their behavior on the alcohol (Freeman et al., 2015). The perpetrators' level of alcohol consumption was found to be irrelevant for the police in determining the credibility of the perpetrator (Randall, 2010).

This myth has also been analyzed in relation to the courts. The current Criminal Code of Canada provisions provide that no consent is obtained if "the complainant is incapable of consenting to the activity" (Criminal Code, 2018). Incapacity occurs when women willingly drink or take drugs that interfere with their ability to give consent. Accordingly, if the survivor has drunk enough that they lack the capacity to consent; the perpetrator's actions constitute a sexual assault (Benedet, 2010). In reality, the courts have struggled to determine what that level is other than total incapacitation. If the drugs or alcohol were taken voluntarily, the standard is near incapacitation for her to not be able to provide consent. Research on judges' decision-making has found that there continues to be a misconception that voluntary ingestion of drugs and alcohol is equivalent to voluntary consent. This leads to the determination that no assault has taken place (Benedet, 2010; Jozkowski & Wiersma, 2015).

Myth: When women say no to sex they really mean yes

Consent as a theme was present for both the myth on victim's alcohol use and the myth that women say no when they really mean yes. The myth that women say no to sex when they

really mean yes is understood by feminist scholars to be based upon sexual scripts that see men as sexual pursuers who are encouraged to aggressively seek their sexual desires (Horvath & Brown, 2009). Women's role in the interaction is to either accept or deny the advances, that puts the onus on women to say 'no' and to set the limits on what will happen (Buchwald et al., 1993).

The myth has been identified as problematic for the courts as women saying 'no' is important for determining whether a sexual assault took place. This is important because the definition of consent is dependent upon linguistic forms that are steeped in political structures that impact the discourse. Men and dominant groups are seen as having the power to contribute more to the beliefs and values that speakers and writers use to construct linguistic meaning (Ehrlich, 1998). As a result, if there is no 'no' it is assumed it is a yes, but this communication is based upon power differentials that privilege men's speech (Du Toit, 2007).

Myth: If the victim dresses provocatively that is consent to sexual relations.

Again, the myth that when women dress provocatively they consent to sex is framed around women and their actions. The myth is influenced by gender roles that dictate how women 'should' act towards men. Women who dress provocatively are seen as promiscuous and are not behaving in line with societal norms surrounding femininity (DeMartini & Shariff, 2015). The research has noted that those survivors who do not ascribe to traditional gender norms in behaviour and dress are seen to have played a role in their victimization (Foreman, 2015). In contrast, survivors who fall in line with white-femininity (middle-class, innocent and submissive) are an ideal-victim and are more likely to be believed and treated as a survivor than those that do not abide by gender norms (Madriz, 1997). For example, one study found that participants ascribed more responsibility to victims when they were told that the victim was dressed provocatively (Horvath & Brown, 2009). The responsibility that the myth places onto

the survivor was found to have an impact after the assault because what the woman wears affects her credibility. This affects the court process as her clothes are analyzed and are seen as important to the case in determining the guilt or innocence of the perpetrator (Lees, 1997).

Myth: Men who are aroused have to have sex

The myth that men who are aroused have to have sex contrasts with the previous myths as the focus is on the perpetrator. The myth is given credence based upon the argument that sex is part of men's biological imperative. The argument is that men's sex drives are uncontrollable so once they are aroused, they have to have sex. The perpetrator feels sexually entitled and, as such, does not consider the wishes of his partner or respect what she wants (Freeman et al., 2015). Therefore, the perpetrator's actions are explained away and he is not considered responsible for the assault.

Myth: If the victim flirts with the person, then she has consented to sexual relations

The myth that if the victim flirts with the perpetrator she has consented to sexual relations is premised on traditional conceptions of femininity. The rationale behind the myth is that women are supposed to be pursued and men are supposed to pursue. When women flirt they are deviating from this norm and are 'slut shamed' for this transgression. Slut shaming is where women are condemned for expressing sexual agency in ways that do not conform to societal expectations. This serves to regulate women's behaviour and places the blame for the assault on her because she was 'asking for it' (Shariff & DeMartini, 2015).

This depiction of women and their sexuality does not take into consideration the contradictions in women's sexual empowerment. Currently, the sexualized woman is an empowered woman, as sex and power are interwoven. However, the same behaviours that are

celebrated for being empowered are also the same behaviours that are condemned and controlled, through sexual violence (Ball, 2014). Problematically, women are told to be sexy and flirty but if they do so, they are asking for it and are blamed for the assault. This contradiction constrains women's sexual empowerment as gender roles produce myths that control women's behaviour (Shariff & DeMartini, 2015).

#### Myth: If you agreed to sex once then you have consented to sex in the future

The myth that if you say yes once, you have consented in the future purports that responsibility is placed onto the survivor for any assault that occurs any time after consensual sex. The myth is impacted by the relationship between the perpetrator and the survivor prior to the assault. A number of studies have found that if the survivor and the perpetrator had met before the incident, then it is assumed that it was consensual (Bell et al., 1994; Brown & Walklate, 2012; Monson et al., 1996). The literature indicates that survivors who knew their assailant are more likely to be blamed for the assault (Bell et al., 1994). This blame is problematic as women internalize this viewpoint and believe that the incident does not qualify as sexual assault (Deming et al., 2013).

#### Challenging Rape Myths

Rape myths continued to be identified as a problem throughout the 1990s and 2000s, there had been steps taken towards women's equality in previous decades but there was a shift during this time to differentiate women's experiences. In particular, feminism during this time tried to bring greater awareness of differences between women and the impact that these differences have on their lived reality. In particular, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality to raise awareness around the multiple layers of oppression some women

experience. Importantly, these factors focused on structural issues of race, class and gender; therefore, feminism within this era still focused on structural issues used to oppress women but also recognized multiple ‘truths’ to reflect different women’s experiences (Cheal, 1991).

Sexual assault continued to be considered an area of concern as research recurrently indicated that sexual assault was committed by people the survivor knew (Bevacqua, 2000). In particular, date rape (i.e. a sexual assault where the perpetrator is someone the survivor had gone on a date with) came to the forefront as an issue given its prevalence on college campuses and the need to prevent these assaults (Dicker, 2016). This work challenged the myth that sexual assault is committed by a stranger by acknowledging that sexual assault can be committed by someone known to the survivor.

Sexual assault as a concern has been reflected within the changes to the law surrounding rape. As feminist activism grew in the 1970s, many advocates argued that patriarchal norms had been embedded in law and created barriers to holding men to account for sexual violence (Barranco, 2016). For example, under the Criminal Code at that time, rape was defined as when a man had non-consensual intercourse with a woman who was not his wife (Criminal Code, 1953). Under this definition, a husband could not be convicted of rape by definition. Because of this, law reform efforts starting in the early 1980s sought to enact reforms that reflected the perspective that sexual assault is a physical crime and not one of passion, to create a legal framework that would encourage survivors of sexual assault to come forward (Barranco, 2016).

In 1980 the case of *R v Pappajohn* (1980) addressed the criminal defense of mistake of fact for sexual assault. In the case a real-estate agent had met with Pappajohn to put his house up for sale. They had gone out for lunch together and returned to the house where they engaged in sexual intercourse. Although the real-estate agent did consent to the preliminary sexual

interaction, she did not consent to sexual relations. Pappajohn argued that he had an honest but mistaken belief that she consented and, as such, did not have the required mental element of subjective intention or recklessness to be convicted of the crime. The court held that an honest but mistaken belief on the part of the defendant that the victim had consented would excuse him from criminal liability, but they held on the facts that Pappajohn did not have that belief and knew she was not consenting. On that basis, Pappajohn was convicted, but the case raised serious questions about the grounds on which men believed women were consenting. Rape myths in particular could be used to support a perpetrator's mistaken belief in consent.

In 1992, largely because of feminist advocacy, Parliament legislated the notion of affirmative consent by outlining reasonable steps a sexual initiator needs to take before engaging in sexual relations. This was a departure from previous legislation that continually focused on the victim's actions and whether it constituted consent. The law also broadened the scope of what could be considered sexual assault. Importantly, what does not constitute consent was further refined to provide clarity in judicial decision making.

Importantly, in *R v Park*, the Supreme Court held that the absence of the survivor saying 'yes' means that it is a 'no'. Thus, there was a shift from no meaning non-consent to the absence of yes meaning non-consent (*R. v. Park*, 1995). This shift helped address the myth that women say no when they really mean yes by rejecting it outright. Importantly, this shifted responsibility to the perpetrator to ensure the victim had said yes before engaging in sexual relations. As such, previous behaviour could not be used to support the perpetrator's honest but mistaken belief as he should have taken reasonable steps to ensure the victim consented (Gotell, 2008).

The Supreme Court of Canada further developed the construction of affirmative consent in *R v Ewanchuk*. In this case a man brought a 17year old girl to his van for a job interview and, after

the interview was over, he asked her to come into his trailer behind the van to see where the work would take place. When they entered the trailer he started to touch her body in increasingly sexual ways. Each time she said no to his advances he would briefly stop before resuming his advances. She noted that she was very afraid when she was in the trailer and this stopped her from taking further action. The Supreme Court of Canada held that there is no defense of implied consent to sexual assault and explicitly found that the responsibility lies with the accused to prove there was reasonable doubt with regard to consent (*R v. Ewanchuk*). Therefore, the perpetrator cannot claim he had an honest but mistaken belief in consent if he assumed consent because the survivor was silent or passive during the interaction (*R. v. Ewanchuk, 1999*). Importantly, while previous case law had discussed changes to consent, this case directly discussed and challenged rape myths. In particular, the Supreme Court notes the following:

This error does not derive from the findings of fact but from mythical assumptions that when a woman says ‘no’ she is really saying ‘yes’, ‘try again’, or ‘persuade me’. To paraphrase Fraser C.J. at p. 263, it denies women’s sexual autonomy and implies that women are ‘walking around this country in a state of constant consent to sexual activity’ (para, 87).

Thus, the Supreme Court directly rejected these myths, by determining that they do not constitute consent.

Nonetheless, the challenges in addressing rape myths in the law is reflective of broader difficulties of challenging rape myths held by the public. This is illustrated in the research surrounding the adoption of affirmative consent on college campuses. These studies note that people’s perceptions of consent are impacted by their beliefs. For individuals who accept rape myths and believe that women normally say ‘no’ when they mean ‘yes’, the use of coercion in obtaining consent is seen as necessary in order to get consent (Shafur, Ortiz, Thompson, &

Huemmer, 2017). Moreover, it may lead to greater miscommunication; for instance, women may want only to kiss but this agreement to something sexual is seen as agreement to anything sexual. Problematically, this may be linked to other rape myths that blame the victim, which works to alleviate personal responsibility from acts of coercion in obtaining consent (Canan, Jozkowski, & Crawford, 2016).

When consent is considered in relation to communication there are two strands that emerge, aggressive and assertive. Aggressive communication is focused on the sexual initiator achieving his desires at any cost. Assertive communication is expressing desire while being considerate of others, as with affirmative consent (Shafer, Ortiz, Thompson & Huemmer, 2018). Affirmative consent is obtaining willing consent to sexual relations throughout the interaction (Muehlenhard, Humphreys, Jozkowski, & Peterson, 2016). Because of this dichotomy, research has indicated that education on affirmative consent framed simply as getting consent can still result in sexual assault because people who believe in rape myths will still use coercive communication to gain consent (Shafer, Ortiz, Thompson & Huemmer, 2018; Willis & Jozkowski, 2018).

Accordingly, even though there have been changes within the law and there is case law to support affirmative consent, it is still unclear how the meaning of consent is constructed by the members of the public. The research on consent on college campuses indicates that there continues to be linkages between rape myths and consent, which warrants further study to determine the continued impact of rape myths on how we construct the meaning of sexual assault and what constitutes consent.

## Social Media and Feminist Discussions of Sexual Assault

In spite of decades of feminist research and activism, sexual assault continues to be an important issue for women (Brown & Walklate, 2012; Horvath & Brown, 2009). Most recently, feminists have turned to online media to find spaces where women can challenge the treatment of sexual assault survivors (Salter, 2013). Feminist use of social media arguably began around 2012 when women went online to challenge gender tropes. Since then, the Internet has been used as a means to call out the misogyny women experience in their everyday lives. For example, Powell and Henry (2015) analyzed women's use of online media to counter negative reactions they were subjected to online in general, with particular emphasis on how social media is used by survivors to discuss sexual assault outside of the criminal justice system. They found that survivors use social media as a means to acquire justice informally outside of the criminal justice system. Justice in this context refers to survivors being validated and having their voice heard. Additionally, they found that survivors' participation facilitated the creation of online counter-publics that allowed survivors to discuss the assault and to receive support from a broader community (Powell & Henry, 2015).

Feminist scholars examining the potential of social media to effect social change and promote women's equality have expressed the sentiment that this virtual engagement facilitates bridges between different cultural groups and is not limited by national borders. Importantly, this allows for cross-cultural dialogue and the inclusion of more people within these discussions (Looft, 2017). Arguably, social media has re-popularized interest within feminism by opening up participation to others who may not have participated previously as they saw the issue on social media and decided to engage (Rivers, 2017). This has facilitated global connections between feminists (Munro, 2013) as they have used social media platforms such as, Tumblr, Facebook,

YouTube and Twitter to further gender equality. Looft (2017) notes that Twitter in particular has been used to promote political activism through ‘hashtag feminism’. In like vein, the magazine *New Internationalist* focused an entire issue on the reclamation of women’s voices and the new generation of networked and tech-savvy feminist movements (New Internationalist, 2014).

However, the use of social media for feminist issues may continue to repurpose dominant constructions and could ignore fringe positions as they may still be drowned out (Looft, 2017). Additionally, the connection of others through social media exposes people to a wide variety of ideas and connects people that think in the same capacity. Rather than focusing on a broad feminist objective it can lead to fissures within feminism as people focus on these minute details and the broader issue is placed in the background (Baumgardner, 2011). Moreover, there is a presumption with the use of social media that because it involves new technology it is automatically providing something new to feminism. However, some of the main views adopted online are the same that have been seen before (Rivers, 2017). However, social media may provide connections between diverse individuals and could be the site for new conversations for feminism and promote alternative discourses surrounding feminist issues.

The intent of the current project is to determine whether social media (Twitter) has indeed created a medium for the creation of alternative discourses surrounding sexual assault. To do this, I explicate dominant and alternative discourses surrounding sexual assault as expressed on the hashtag #beenrapedneverreported.

### Current Thesis

Feminist scholarship has continually demonstrated that sexual assault is under-reported (Brown & Walklate, 2012) because common myths about rape work to silence women who are

assaulted (Gracia, 2004; Brown & Walklate, 2012). Furthermore, previous research on rape myths has primarily used positivist methodologies to determine the demographic characteristics of people who adhere to and propagate rape myths by administering Rape Myth Acceptance Scales (Gerger, Kley, Bohner, & Siebler, 2007; Payne et al., 1999). This psychological approach is consistent with other research that has measured the extent to which these myths become internalized both by survivors and by others who impose these myths on survivors when they disclose their experiences (Ullman, 2010). Negative reactions and the concern over possible negative reactions discourage discussion around the assault.

Although some researchers have used open ended questions to supplement the scales (Tomkins, 2017), there is a need for new qualitative work that provides a deeper understanding of the ways that women talk about and understand sexual assault. The current study adds to and expands the research on rape myths by using the hashtag #beenrapedneverreported to examine the impact, if any, that these myths have on discussions surrounding sexual assault. This research also extends our current knowledge on the current trend of using social media as a means of feminist activism. Given the relatively new advent of ‘hashtag feminism’, #beenrapedneverreported provides an avenue to add to this understanding by examining whether survivors participating on social media actively challenge these myths or if rape myths continue to dominate the discussion. It also provides an important site to examine if, and how, alternative or resistive understandings of sexual assault can be shared by women through networked media.

### **Chapter Three- Methodology**

In the present chapter I explicate the qualitative content analysis method and why I chose it to analyze the tweets in my sample. I then explain the epistemological and ontological assumptions behind this methodological approach. Finally, I operationalize the key concept of sexual assault and provide the coding frame used to analyze the construction of sexual assault in the tweets, focusing particularly on constructions that reassert or resist the rape myths identified in the literature.

#### **Qualitative Content Analysis**

A qualitative content analysis can be defined as a methodological approach to analyze text within its frame of communication. Various recorded media can potentially be the entity under study in a qualitative content analysis, such as interviews, observational protocols, tapes and other documents (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Mayring, 2000). A qualitative content analysis systematically describes qualitative material (Flick, 2014; Schreier, 2012).

The literature indicates that qualitative content analysis emerged out of quantitative content analysis and has continued to develop and change over time. There are a number of commonalities between quantitative and qualitative content analysis. First, they are both systematic in their description of the data. Second, they both have a set of steps to follow that creates a frame to code the data. However, the meaning gathered from the data is different depending on whether a quantitative or qualitative method is used. A quantitative content analysis is focused on manifest meaning whereas qualitative content analysis is focused on latent meanings (Flick, 2014). Manifest meaning is information that is 'obvious' and does not require interpretation. For example, researchers may look for particular words in the data and calculate

their frequency (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In contrast, latent meaning requires a level of interpretation and abstraction in deriving meaning from the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Schreier, 2012).

Qualitative analysis has been used effectively in feminist studies of sexual assault. For example, Ullman, Lorenz and Kirkner (2017) conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with survivors of sexual assault and family and friends they disclosed the sexual assault. The purpose of the study was to outline the impact alcohol use has on social reactions of disclosure and the barriers this creates for survivors coming forward. The study found that survivors received both positive and negative reactions from family, friends and significant others who they told about the assault. Importantly, the study found that negative reactions asked why the survivor was drinking and also attributed blame on to the survivor as alcohol use was seen as a risk taking behaviour (Ullman et al., 2017). Additionally, a qualitative content analysis was used by Dardis, Kraft and Gidycz (2017) to determine the way college women label certain behaviour as sexual assault. The research was based upon previous findings that over half of women whose experience legally met the definition of sexual assault did not label it rape. Importantly, the sample was composed of survivors and non-survivors and the researchers used a mix of likert questions followed by open ended questions within the survey. The surveys were administered in person in small groups. The participants were notified that they could stop at any time and the researchers provided information about on-campus services for survivors at the completion of the survey. The study found that college women who explained the sexual relation as miscommunication often linked the consent to alcohol and that alcohol use lead to ambiguity surrounding sexual interest. Moreover, the study found that women were more likely to label a

rape as miscommunication if there had been initial sexual activity before the assault occurred (Dardis et al., 2017).

These studies illustrate that research on sexual assault has been premised upon the acknowledgement of differential treatment of women that are based upon the social meanings ascribed to gender. As previously illustrated women have been silenced with regard to sexual assault (Gracia, 2004); because of this, a deeper analysis of the meanings women ascribe to sexual assault can help give women's perspectives voice as they can actively participate in the co-construction of social meaning. Importantly, this participation provides a better understanding of sexual assault. This position is reflected in the research on feminists' use of qualitative methods as researchers are encouraged to use methods that facilitate women's voices coming forward in order to reject the power relations that serve to silence women (O'Shaughnessy & Krogman, 2012).

### Paradigm, Epistemology, and Ontology

The paradigm used for the research is crucial as it represents the basis for the decisions made along the way for the research project. The paradigm that was selected was based upon epistemological, ontological and methodological considerations (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The paradigm used for the current project is constructivist. Constructivism is an umbrella term that subsumes a variety of different branches. For the purpose of the current research, I am using a general constructivist approach as it reflects the position that reality is actively constructed (Loseke, 2003). Moreover, I grounded my project in social constructionism in particular. Social constructionism posits that the world as we know it is understood through the interactions we have with the people around us. As such, we collectively create meaning through these interactions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The major component of social constructionism is the

position that people conceptualize the world around them so it is important to explore how they create this understanding (Loseke, 2003). A corollary of this is that there is no one truth to be found; rather there are multiple truths and ways of looking at an issue (Burr, 2003; Jun, 2006). Therefore, what we know and how we conceive of the world is dependent upon the meanings that we produce socially in our interactions with other people (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Importantly, in this approach knowledge is depicted as dependent upon social practices and the interpretation of these constructions. The knowledge derived from the project is impacted by the epistemological frame. For the current project I approached the data using a relativist epistemology, premised on the belief that the knowledge we have is socially constructed. As such, the knowledge that is created is not objective but is based upon the interpretations of the researcher who produces her version of reality based upon her interaction with the data (Manning, 1997). This epistemological frame works in conjunction with the ontological position of the research. My ontological position is critical realist as I believe that reality is influenced through our social interactions and interpretations of these interactions (Burr, 2003).

Epistemology and ontology are important to interrogate in order to understand what can be gathered from the data. There are challenges with adopting these perspectives. Given the feminist lens used for the project these factors have considerable importance as they impact the role of the researcher in the process. Feminist qualitative methods try to give voice to participants; however, the researcher is ultimately in charge of the research and may constrain the voices of their participants (O'Shaughnessy & Krogman, 2012). There is a push for feminist researchers to create an intimate bond with the participants and to present women's stories as they are; however, this has been problematic as information the person would not normally reveal is brought forward (Kirsch, 2005; Huisman, 2008) and the illusion of a more intimate

relationship may indicate to participants that they are equals in the research process when in fact the researcher has ultimate control of the interpretation of the data gathered (Stacey, 1988). Thus, the knowledge and understanding that is produced from the research is ultimately based upon decisions made by the researcher and not by the participants.

The choices of the researcher within the research process are also critiqued based upon the ontological position. In particular, the critical realist ontological position is accused of 'ontological gerrymandering'. This means that some phenomena are treated as socially constructed whereas other phenomena are depicted as part of an objective reality (Woolgar & Pawluch, 2004). Researchers cannot escape making assumptions about their world, as such; they have to address the boundaries that they make in their research (Woolgar & Pawluch, 2004). Therefore, I had to acknowledge the subjectivity that I bring to the work and the impact that my assumptions have on the research. Although researchers try to rid themselves of the assumptions they have about the world, they shape the lens used to look at the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). While this may create challenges in using this method, boundary work is important. Researchers are impacted by their own subjectivity, by creating boundaries they acknowledge the limitations of their subjectivity. The researcher works with his or her subjectivity rather than ignoring that it exists (Woolgar & Pawluch, 2004).

Moreover, I acknowledged the complexity of the object under study and situated myself within a reflexive standpoint to address these criticisms. A tolerance for complexity stipulates that the researcher is aware of the complexity of the given phenomenon that is under study. Providing simple explanations for multifaceted phenomenon is not advised because part of the interpretation and meaning is lost when something intricate is simplified. If what is under study is complex, then the description provided should be equally complex in order to properly

describe the object under study. The multifaceted nature of the phenomenon is part of what gives it its meaning (Ezzy, 2002). I address this in the writing style of my thesis. I used accessible language when I was describing the data to make the findings clear to the audience while still providing a complex description. I spent time and extensive space within my thesis to provide descriptions so that the complexity of the phenomenon is represented in how it is presented and written about.

In order to write in this fashion and to be able to adopt the relativist epistemology and critical realist ontology it was necessary to situate myself in a reflexive standpoint. I achieved this standpoint by acknowledging and using my subjectivity by employing the pre-conceived ideas that I have to understand the data (Unger, 2005). I used this knowledge to reconstitute my relationship with the data. My experiences as a Crisis Counselor with the Ottawa Rape Crisis Center and a member of the Standing Committee for the Prevention of Sexual Violence at the University of Ottawa have informed how I understand sexual assault. Nonetheless, speaking with survivors and analyzing current policies on sexual assault have nuanced my understanding of sexual assault and I consciously brought these nuances to my analysis of tweets. Using a constructivist paradigm I became an interpreter as I provided meaning to the data based upon my interaction with and construction of the material (Manning, 1997). Therefore, I was aware of my own positionality in relation to the research as this impacted the analysis of the data.

### Data Collection

The data used for the analysis was collected from Twitter. There has been debate within the academic community surrounding the use of online data and ethical implications. In particular, the internet is depicted by some as a vast public space, whereas other researchers question the assumption that the internet is a public space (Berry, 2004). Importantly, some

researchers put forward that if members of a discussion need to sign up in order to have access to the conversation then the researcher should respect this perceived privacy. Given the vast and complex nature of the internet there is no standard ethical response to this type of research (Herring, 1996). For the purpose of the current project ethics approval was not gathered for two reasons. The first was that the methods did not require me to interact with the participants either in person or online, as such, I did not have any interaction with survivors. The second was that the information was taken from a hashtag on Twitter. While people can sign up to participate, this information is freely available to anyone with or without an account. Moreover, Twitter allows its users to adjust their level of privacy, I only had access to posts that the users had identified to be available 'publicly'. Therefore, the posters themselves determined the public nature of the posts. Indeed, some of the posts used for the current research were published on the front page of the Huffington Post in an article discussing the hashtag. Since the tweets were publicly available I did not interact directly with survivors. This is important as this ensured the posters were not triggered by the analysis since there was no contact. Additionally, I chose to use posters' handles on Twitter rather than posters' names as the handles tended to be abstract and did not directly identify a particular person by name. While it is certainly still possible to identify the poster through a Twitter search, she is not immediately identifiable upon first reading. Furthermore, posting on the hashtag does not mean that posters are survivors; it merely indicates that they are discussing sexual assault. As such, any concern about 'outing' survivors is minimized. All of the tweets that were still posted<sup>3</sup> on the hashtag #beenrapedneverreported were

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<sup>3</sup>. It is possible that other tweets may have been posted to the hashtag from October 30, 2014 to June 21, 2016 and deleted, either by the poster or the hashtag owners. Since there is a report function on Twitter, some of the tweets may have been reported and were not available when I collected the data. Accordingly, any tweets that had been deleted from the hashtag or were posted after June 21<sup>st</sup> were not collected.

collected from when the hashtag started, October 30, 2014 until the date the data was collected on June 21, 2016. This cut off point was selected as there had been a significant drop off in the number of posts. *Units of Analysis*

The specific unit of analysis that were extracted were tweets. Since Twitter places constraints on the users so that they can only use 120 characters for each post, each tweet was taken in its entirety. There were not enough words per tweet to separate in to different sections as the tweet would lose its meaning and context. Specific words were not extracted because posters were describing their experiences in their own words and, as such, I wanted to ensure all of the tweets possible were captured to reflect the different narratives of the posters.

#### *Qualitative Analysis*

Qualitative analysis begins with the researcher becoming familiar with the data. In the case of textual data this requires that the researcher re-read the material a number of times in order to gain an understanding of what people are talking about. Based upon what is found a coding frame is developed that helps to organize the material and reflects the themes that were found in the initial exposure to the data. Once the data is coded it is re-read to look for common areas and instances where the material diverges. Where useful, the data is further subdivided to showcase the developing themes that are present. Once the coding is finalized the most significant themes and ideas that are present in the data are taken and conclusions are drawn that address the research questions in a compelling way (O'Connor & Gibson, 2003).

Qualitative research relates to the constructivist paradigm as it allows the researcher to take in to consideration the different positions in the data. The codes and themes that develop relate to a relativist epistemology as they are created based upon the researcher's interpretations

of the data. The knowledge produced from qualitative research then is socially constructed within the relationship between the researcher and the data. Moreover, qualitative research lends itself to a critical realist ontological position as the successive reading and familiarization of the data connects the researcher with what can be gleaned from the data. Since multiple themes can be gathered from the data it lends itself to depicting the multiple ways people can perceive the object under study and that the findings created are dependent upon these differential realities culminating together.

### *Coding Steps*

I began my analysis by reading and re-reading the tweets several times. Through this reading, I determined that rape myths were central to the construction of the meaning of sexual assault on the hashtag (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Bryman, 1994; Patton, 2002). I conducted a review of the literature to determine the ten most common myths. Since rape myths influence the interpretations of sexual assault of both survivors and the people to whom survivors disclose (i.e. friends, family and police), I conceived of them as a dominant discourse surrounding understandings of sexual assault. As such, I used rape myths as a lens for determining both how sexual assault was constructed on the hashtag and the potential of the hashtag to create a space for alternative meanings. Since the posters had used the hashtag as a space to come forward and discuss their reasons for not reporting their sexual assault, I wanted to map the use of rape myths and the implications this had for producing alternative understandings of sexual assault (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Mayring, 2000). Because of this, the sample for the analysis was selected based upon whether or not the tweet either restated or challenged one of the ten rape myths.

After the sample was collated, the material was analyzed step by step (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Mayring, 2000). I examined the tweets that discussed the myths and focused on dominant

and alternative discourses. For the purpose of the current project discourses were perceived as social products that are constructed by interactions between social actors. A discourse is a particular perspective on an issue or a topic; as such, there can be multiple discourses that pertain to one phenomena. Discourses were perceived as dominant when the language and position appears most often when describing the phenomena (Cole, 2018). Prior research has established that rape myths themselves are the dominant discourse for describing and understanding sexual assault. I accordingly took the definition of the myths from the literature to explicate the dominant position and see if and how it is resisted. Alternative discourses are also produced through social interaction; however, alternative discourses challenge the existing discourses that are in place and provide a different perspective on an issue (Alcoff, 2009). Thus, tweets that subverted sexual assault myths by actively and passively challenging them were considered alternative as they provided a perspective that differed from the dominant discourse.

Dominant discourse tweets were coded as reportive while alternative discourse tweets were coded as resistive. This framed the analysis of how sexual assault was constructed by each myth. To organize the tweets each myth was taken and their resisting and reporting tweets were separated in two word documents. After coding all of the data, each resistive and reportive document was read to ensure that each item in it belonged in each category (Flick, 2014). While reading the tweets I looked at the codes to see if another researcher/person looking at the coding would have come up with the same codes or alternatively would have easily understood why the material was coded in that manner (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Mayring, 2000). My second round of coding was very similar to the first, so I accordingly determined the coding was consistent (Flick, 2014). This review of the coding was conducted to ensure the reliability and validity of the codes.

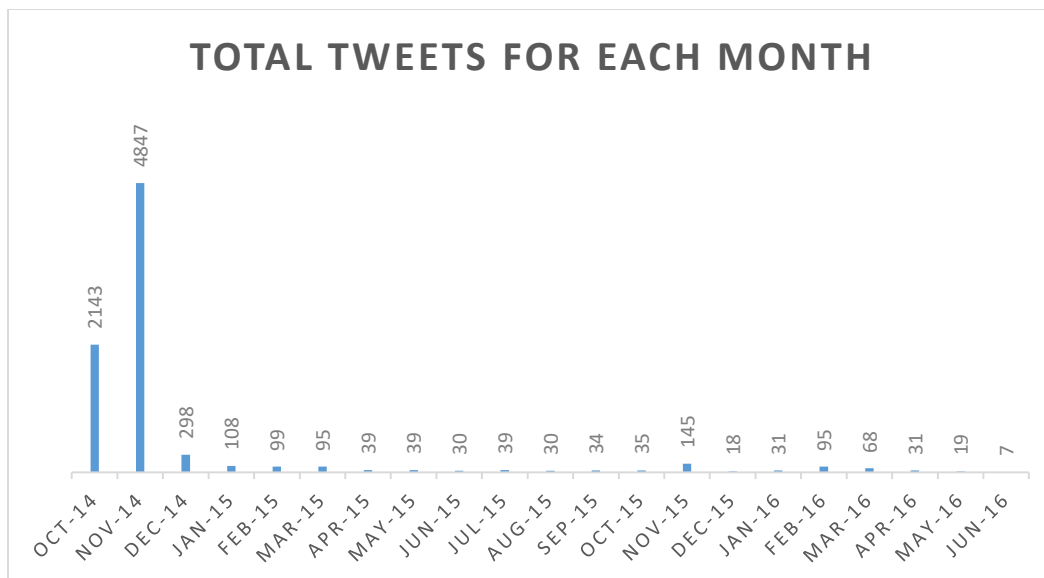
Having completed the coding of the data, the total number of tweets from each myth was calculated, as well as, the total for each reportive and resistive category. This was calculated to determine the order of the myths from most prevalent on the hashtag to least prevalent. This provided the order for the analysis. The myth that was most prevalent was selected as the first to be analyzed. Each myth was analyzed first from the lens of reporting tweets and then from resisting tweets.

#### **Chapter Four- Analysis Chapter:**

This chapter provides an analysis of the data. The chapter begins with a description of the sample used for the analysis. Data was obtained from Twitter and the tweets were collected from the hashtag #beenrapedneverreported. A total of 8, 250 tweets were collected but after coding for rape myths, 1,219 were used for the analysis. Each myth was then analyzed first by how they report on the myth and then how they resist it. The data was analyzed to explore the discussion surrounding sexual assault and whether these discussions produced alternative discourses or if they restated common tropes surrounding rape. Rape myths were used as a lens to determine if these discussions represent a departure from the general public's conceptualization of sexual assault. The main findings from each myth are explicated first based on posters restating the myths and then by posters resistance to the myths.

Sue Montgomery of the Montreal Gazette and Antonia Zerbisias of the Toronto Star started the hashtag on October 30, 2014. Each tweet listed on the hashtag contained a date that it was ostensibly posted and a username for the person who ostensibly posted it. I downloaded all the tweets (including dates and usernames) dated October 30, 2014 to June 21, 2016 in June 2016<sup>4</sup>. In total, I collected 8, 250 tweets.

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As indicated in Graph 1, the majority of tweets (6990 or 85%) were posted during the first month (October 30, 2014 -November 30, 2014) of the hashtag and then dropped off dramatically after November 2014.

All of the tweets (8, 250) were coded to identify who ostensibly posted each one. I then coded the tweets by the gender of the poster as it was represented in the tweet itself. Due to the limits of publicly-posted online data, I was unable to confirm the gender of each poster.

However, since I was interested in the ways that the meaning of sexual assault was constructed in the Twitter dialogue, I analysed each tweet for representations of gender to determine if/how the construction of the gender of the poster was presented in each post. Since gender is not a binary characteristic, I categorized individuals into **three** groups, including:

- female (posters whose profile photo, name, handle<sup>5</sup> or pronouns self-presented as female);

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<sup>5</sup> On Twitter your handle is your personal identification on Twitter and allows other users to find you.

- male (posters whose profile photo, name, handle or pronouns self-presented as male);
- non-identified others (posters whose name or photo was not a clear indication of gender self-presentation (e.g. androgynous name or pixelated picture)).

I categorized non-individual posters into three groups, including:

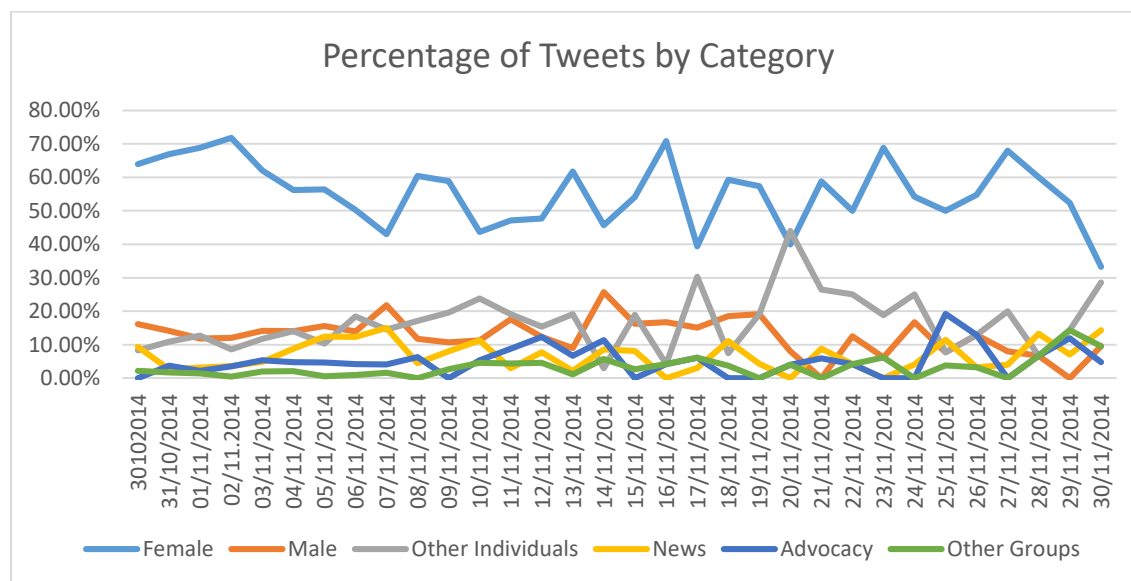
- News agencies (posters whose name, handle or profile description<sup>6</sup> indicated an association with a news outlet);
- Advocacy groups (posters whose name and profile description indicated an association with advocacy or social justice particularly for sexual assault survivors or violence against women); and
- Other groups (posters who were part of a group but did not qualify as a news agency or advocacy group<sup>7</sup>).

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<sup>6</sup> The profile description is a personal statement users post to describe themselves to others on Twitter.

<sup>7</sup> Examples of other groups include groups that map Twitter trending, the New Democratic Party, and Canadian universities.

Graph 2 indicates the breakdown of posters for the first month (October 30, 2014- November 30, 2014) of the hashtag.



The first month<sup>8</sup> of the hashtag was selected to portray the posters who were ostensibly posting on the hashtag. This time frame was selected as 85% (6990) of the tweets in the sample occurred during this time. Notably, individuals represented a majority of posters (65.4%-92.4%). This included posters presenting as female, male, and non-identified individuals. However, posters presenting as female represented a significant majority (55.1% average) of those posting on the hashtag. Posters presenting as male encompassed a minority of the posters, averaging around 12 percent (0%-25.7%). Posters coded as non-identified individuals also represented a minority of posts (17.3% average). Non-individual posters (i.e. advocacy groups, news agencies and other groups) made up a minority of the posts (7.6%-34.6%). Advocacy groups represented approximately 5% of the posts on average. News agencies and the other group category posted the least amount out of the six groups (6.9% average and 3.4% respectively).

<sup>8</sup> The first month only contains two days, as such, it has been combined with the second month.

I then coded the tweets based upon the 10 rape myths that were commonly discussed in the literature on sexual assault:

1. Men cannot be sexually assaulted and women do not commit sexual assault.
2. Victims lie about being sexually assaulted.
3. Sexual assault is committed by a stranger (in a dark alley).
4. Sexual assault is just sex (i.e. it is not violence).
5. If the victim drinks alcohol (or takes drugs) then that is consent to sexual relations.
6. When women say no to sex they really mean yes.
7. If the victim dresses provocatively that is consent to sexual relations.
8. Men who are aroused have to have sex.
9. If the victim flirts with the person, then they have consented to sexual relations.
10. If you agreed to sex once then you have consented to sex in the future.

A word document was created for each rape myth. The tweets were read and then copied into the relevant word document. If a tweet discussed more than one myth (this only happened in a few instances) it was coded based on the first myth that was discussed. I determined that since it was the first myth listed that it was the most important. A second round of coding was conducted to ensure that the tweets had been coded with the correct myth. The tweets within each coded myth were further subdivided based on whether the poster discussed the myth or resisted the myth. Tweets that discussed the myth encompassed posters directly or indirectly talking about rape myths. Specifically, if the posts showed the internalization of the myth by the poster or if the post showed how myths are put forward by others who were not assaulted (i.e. friends, family, and police who were told about the assault) they were depicted as discussing the myth. For example, for myth no. 8 (victims lie about sexual assault), if the poster said that

“victims are liars” then this was coded as directly reporting the myth. Additionally, indirect tweets were also depicted as discussing the myth. For example, for myth no. 2 (alcohol equals consent), if the tweet stated “the police said it was my fault for drinking”, it was seen as discussing the myth because, while it is not the poster who is necessarily ‘saying’ it, the tweet does not have any words that challenge the myth. To organize and simplify the analysis these tweets were subsumed under one category labelled ‘reporting’.

Tweets were coded as resistive if they used language that directly contradicted the myth. For example, for myth no. 1 (provocative clothing equals consent), a resistive statement would be, “my clothes do not give consent”. Additionally, tweets were coded as resisting the myth if the way sexual assault was being discussed countered the myth. This included tweets that used language that indirectly challenged the myth. For example, for myth no. 7 (sexual assault is committed by a stranger), a resistive tweet would be “I was assaulted by my father”. Although the tweet did not directly say that sexual assault is not committed by strangers, since the tweet talked about family, this countered the myth by showcasing that it was not just strangers who commit sexual assault. If any part of the tweet indicated resistance it was coded as resistive. Even if part of the tweet could have been construed as reportive this was interpreted as providing context to the resistive statement and was thus read together. The tweets were not split in their coding (I.e., a tweet could only belong in one category) to ensure as much context for each tweet was kept. It is important to note that not all of the tweets discussed rape myths, of the sample, one in six tweets (1773) discussed rape myths<sup>9</sup>. Table one outlines the number of reporting and resisting tweets per myth and each poster category.

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<sup>9</sup> The tweets that are not coded as rape myths either talk about the hashtag itself (i.e. that it is trending) or it is posters putting links to articles, as such, they were not included in the sample.

Table One: Reporting and resisting posts for each myth

Rape Myth No. 1: Men cannot be sexually assaulted and women do not commit sexual assault							
	Female	Male	Other Ind.	News	Advocacy	Other Grp.	Total
Reporting	227	72	36	31	20	2	388
Resisting	91	89	56	7	7	4	254
Rape Myth No. 2: Victims lie about being sexually assaulted							
	Female	Male	Other Ind.	News	Advocacy	Other Grp.	Total
Reporting	164	9	21	2	3	2	201
Resisting	118	17	22	4	7	0	168
Rape Myth No. 3: Sexual assault is committed by a stranger (in a dark alley)							
	Female	Male	Other Ind.	News	Advocacy	Other Grp.	Total
Reporting	68	3	7	0	2	0	80
Resisting	157	9	28	2	1	0	197
Rape Myth No. 4: Sexual assault is just sex (i.e. it is not violence)							
	Female	Male	Other Ind.	News	Advocacy	Other Grp.	Total
Reporting	23	14	13	0	0	2	42
Resisting	79	7	7	0	2	0	94
Rape Myth No. 5: If the victim drinks alcohol (or takes drugs) then that is consent to sexual relations							
	Female	Male	Other Ind.	News	Advocacy	Other Grp.	Total
Reporting	85	3	11	0	0	0	99
Resisting	29	3	0	1	1	1	35
Rape Myth No. 6: When women say no to sex they really mean yes							
	Female	Male	Other Ind.	News	Advocacy	Other Grp.	Total
Reporting	38	2	10	0	0	0	50
Resisting	46	0	4	0	0	0	50
Rape Myth No. 7: If the victim dresses provocatively that is consent to sexual relations							
	Female	Male	Other Ind.	News	Advocacy	Other Grp.	Total
Reporting	14	2	1	0	0	0	17
Resisting	17	2	2	0	0	0	21
Rape Myth No. 8: Men who are aroused have to have sex							
	Female	Male	Other Ind.	News	Advocacy	Other Grp.	Total
Reporting	17	3	0	0	0	0	20
Resisting	14	1	2	1	0	0	18
Rape Myth No. 9: If the victim flirts with the person, then they have consented to sexual relations							
	Female	Male	Other Ind.	News	Advocacy	Other Grp.	Total
Reporting	14	0	3	0	0	0	17
Resisting	9	1	1	0	0	0	11
Rape Myth No. 10: If you agreed to sex once then you have consented to sex in the future							
	Female	Male	Other Ind.	News	Advocacy	Other Grp.	Total
Reporting	9	1	1	0	0	0	11
Resisting	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Even though some of the myths are prevalent in the literature, there was variation in their use on the hashtag. The most popular myth on the hashtag was “men cannot be sexually assaulted and women cannot sexually assault”; it represented 36% of all of the tweets that discussed rape myths. Additionally, there was variability in the posters discussing each myth. Female posters were the largest contributors to every single myth. Overall, female posters represented 69% (1219) of the posts on the hashtag that discussed rape myths. This is reflective of the broader trend on the hashtag as a method for women to reclaim their voices.

A comparative analysis was not conducted of the different groups on the hashtag. The hashtag revolved around women and their contributions; as such, the analysis reflects this focus. Additionally, since female posters were the majority within the sample, it was difficult to compare groups especially news, advocacy, and other groups as there were not enough posts to derive substantial themes. These groups made up three percent, two percent, and less than one percent respectively. Male posters and other individuals were not compared because some male posters discussed the myths in a similar capacity to female posters as they were also survivors, as such, there was not a lot to compare. For posters coded as ‘other individuals’ it was particularly difficult to compare as they often reflected the same position as female posters but it was unclear who was posting. The posters could have been female but it was not clear from their online presentation. Therefore, the analysis focused on the constructions of female posters. Each section of analysis begins with how the tweets reported the myth and moves to the manner that posters used to resist the myth.

### Rape Myth no. 1: Men cannot be sexually assaulted and women do not commit sexual assault

The myth that men cannot be sexually assaulted and women do not commit sexual assault was discussed in the literature in the way men are framed as the perpetrators of sexual violence and women are depicted as survivors of this violence (Bunch, 2006). The majority of reporting tweets reflected the construction from the literature that identifies women as survivors and men as perpetrators. For example, @Jazz2J states, “Women should never be afraid to stand up to these beasts called men. Stay strong ladies”. However, a subset of the reporting tweets was posted by men and women whose sexual assault was not taken seriously because the perpetrators were female. For instance, @Raven\_\_TheBomb tweeted, “#BeenRapedNeverReported because it was a girl and ‘girls can’t rape girls’”. These reporting tweets reflected a position placed on to the poster rather than the position emanating from them.

### Men as Perpetrators, Women as Survivors

Both resisting and reporting tweets focused on the link between gender and its association to perpetrators and survivors. The resisting tweets acknowledged that both males and females are survivors and perpetrators—for example, @BirdeesTweet said, “Raising awareness of sexual abuse and sexual assault #BeenRapedNeverReported thank you to all the brave people speaking out. Not just girls!”—, in contrast, reporting tweets asserted that men are perpetrators of sexual assault and women are survivors.

For reporting tweets, the conversation around gender was discussed binary, placing men and masculinity on one side and women and femininity on the other. This binary understanding of gender illustrated in the tweets is also reflected in the literature, where many authors portray women as violable, passive, and weak (Lees, 1997) and men as aggressive and inviolable

(Javaid, 2014). This construction positions women as ‘natural’ survivors because violability, passivity, and weakness all suggest that women cannot protect themselves from men who are ‘naturally’ violent; it also naturalizes sexual assault as a ‘woman’s problem’.

As a result, women’s experiences of sexual assault were subsumed within larger discussions about violence against women. For example, @meowwkittykatt said, “Let’s work together to end violence against women”. This acknowledges the quantitative research on the subject that argues that sexual assault is a form of gender based violence (Russo & Pirlott, 2006). Nevertheless, framing it in this way has the unintended consequence of excluding survivors that do not fit within a heteronormative framework. These survivors are excluded because violence against women is framed within the literature as women surviving violence perpetrated against them by men (Bunch, 2006). This position seemed to be internalized by posters as the discussion surrounding sexual assault was heteronormative in scope since the construction on the hashtag was predominantly instances of women who were sexually assaulted by men. Therefore, men in general and women who were assaulted by women were not construed as survivors. For instance, @lonelytouristcc said, “because she was a girl so I didn’t think it counted”. Importantly, the posts simply stated posters’ experiences of sexual assault but did not suggest that this should be considered sexual assault. As a result, posters discussed the assault in a heteronormative frame that seemed to put forward that if the assault does not involve a male perpetrator and female survivor it is not sexual assault.

Since men are depicted as perpetrators of sexual assault in this construction, it is men and not women who are construed as both the problem and the solution. For example, @TheCarbLoader stated, “Can I feel simultaneously glad and infuriated by hashtags like #ibelievelucy #beenrapedneverreported exist? Men, get consent. Period”. Female presenting

posters placed responsibility for the assault on to men, this seemed to illustrate that the assault itself is an act perpetrated by men. This portrayal appears to support the critical literature that identifies and critiques the ways women are blamed for and depicted as responsible for sexual assault (Deming et al., 2013; Randall, 2010).

Importantly, male responsibility was placed on to particular men. Within the binary of male-female gender, a second binary separated ‘good’ men who protect women and ‘bad’ men who sexually assault them. In particular, bad men were not construed as exhibiting ‘true’ masculinity. Posters used language like ‘monster’ or ‘not a **real** man’ to separate the perpetrators from other men. For instance, @sasmort said, “No need for decent men to be ashamed – stand with us and show that this is not normal male behaviour”. Due to this construction, men who perpetrate sexual assault are construed as the minority of males and their behaviour is seen as an individual problem. This viewpoint contrasts the literature that depicts sexual assault as a structural problem stemming from the patriarchy. It also creates a disparity between the tweets and the structural linkage made in the literature with sexual assault and violence against women (Bunch, 2006). Consequently, for posters, only certain men are framed as perpetrators and only those men are othered because they do not exhibit proper masculinity. Interestingly, the definition of real men was not defined by posters. This indicates that there is a presumption that men already know what appropriate masculinity is and it is deviations from individual men that results in sexual assault rather than toxic masculinity as a whole.

Consequently, the solution that appears from the tweets is for men to teach other men in general about how to treat women. For example, @SharenDanley stated, “A call to all men. Please stand up to your gender when you see or read about woman being bullied in any form”. In addition, rather than focusing on adult men and changing their viewpoints, posters focused on

shaping appropriate masculinity for future generations. For instance, @FL\_narcissist said, “Fathers, make sure your son knows that ‘No.’ is a complete sentence”. The posters placement of responsibility on to men reflected critical literature that tries to shift the onus away from women to prevent sexual assault (Deming et al., 2013; Randall, 2010). As such, posters did not seem to see the problem as toxic masculinity because only a ‘few’ men deviate from appropriate masculine norms and men in general are the solution to educating those who do. Again, posters frame sexual assault as an individual educational failure rather than how it is reflected in the literature as a structural problem (Bunch, 2006).

### Men as Survivors

The tweets that resisted the myth also focused on gender. The reporting tweets reconstituted traditional gender tropes in their construction of perpetrators and survivors, resisting tweets challenged these gendered associations.

In particular, posters challenged the heteronormative view of survivors as women and instead talked about the experiences of men who had survived sexual assault. This was emphasized by the use of capital letters in the tweet narratives. For example, @stayunbrokenluv said, “To all the women & MEN who have #beenrapedneverreported, ur so strong & I admire you all so much. Continue speaking up for those who cannot”. Importantly, this subverts the common claim found in the literature that sexual assault is gendered (Buchhandler-Raphael, 2011; Bunch, 2006). In including men as survivors, posters attacked the construction of survivors as female only to create this space for male survivors. The deconstruction of gendered typologies of men as aggressive and women as passive meant that women could be considered aggressive and perpetrators of sexual assault. For instance, @CLASSICJAUREGUI stated, “people are only talking about women being raped but not men? its not just guys that can rape somebody a girl

can too”. In trying to create space for male survivors it seems that women’s actions regardless of their position in the interaction are critiqued.

The difficulty with this argument is that research which illustrates the gendered nature of sexual violence against women is undercut. While it is important to acknowledge male survivors, this focus detracts attention from proponents who are trying to raise awareness of the impact of sexual assault on women. For example, @ljdurie said, “Women do not have a monopoly on being sexual assault victims #beenrapedneverreported is about the voiceless victims regardless of gender”. Thus, even under the guise of gender neutrality, discussions of sexual assault are still gendered as women carry the burden for the way sexual assault survivors are discussed and constructed within this conversation.

In addition, the majority of resisting tweets continued to construct gender as a binary characteristic. There was a small number of posters who acknowledged gender as a spectrum and identified non-gender binary survivors as survivors. For example, @jodilicious said, “Please don’t forget that people on all points of the gender spectrum have #BeenRapedNeverReported. #IBelieveThem all”. This construction was drowned out by the general discussion about women and men. Even within the hashtag, sexual assault was still predominately discussed as something that cis-gendered (people whose gender identity corresponds with their sex at birth) people experience.

Interestingly, the perpetrator was largely absent from the conversation in resisting tweets, except when the poster was talking about women who assault men. This finding is consistent with claims in the literature that discussions surrounding sexual assault tend to focus on the survivor and not the perpetrator (Deming et al., 2013.; Randall, 2010). Even those who sought to interrupt mainstream constructions replicated this since, by trying to be inclusive of all survivors,

the conversation became survivor-centric. Therefore, even in trying to resist sexual assault myths, the focus is still on the survivor.

Rape Myth no. 2: Victims lie about being sexually assaulted.

The myth that sexual assault was committed by men was framed in relation to gender. The concentration for the second myth is premised upon the relationship between the survivor and truth. The critical literature focused on how criminal justice system actors perpetuate the myth that victims lie about being sexually assaulted by dismissing sexual assault cases (Randall, 2010). This sentiment was reflected in a majority of reporting tweets based upon what posters were told from others (friends and police) to whom they disclosed the assault. For example, @NormaGoodness said, “Because when I told my friends, they didn’t believe me”. The posters did not say survivors were lying but this was a sentiment expressed to the poster by these groups.

Survivors as Liars

Both resisting and reporting tweets focused on the link between the survivor’s assertion she had been sexually assaulted and truth. However, where resisting tweets acknowledged that when survivors come forward they are telling the truth—for example, @RCWeslowski tweeted, “keep speaking your truths”—reporting tweets reflected the common assertion on the part of others that when survivors disclose they have been sexually assaulted they are lying.

Both sets of tweets placed truth on a binary, with male perpetrators as truth tellers and female survivors as liars in the reporting tweets, and with female survivors as truth tellers and others—family members, police officers who repeat this myth to survivors—as liars. The fact that survivors are met with disbelief and need to prove their status as truth-speakers appears to reflect broader gender dynamics that women’s voices cannot stand on their own, while men can

freely speak. This seems to reflect the literature on patriarchal gender constructs where men's behaviour is not questioned and it is women and their behaviour that is critiqued and analyzed (Breger, 2014). For example, @CatEleven said, "a woman feels she has to qualify every statement – a guy will just state it. It doesn't \*have\* to be qualified". Consequently, women's voices alone are not enough to empower their own stories. For example, @EmpatheticVegan stated, "Was told I needed witnesses for the bruises from physical abuse so I didn't bother reporting what no one saw him do". As a result, if there is no other witness to the sexual assault, then the assault is perceived as not having occurred.

In addition, the survivor's personal attributes were used to discredit her credibility to talk about the assault. If the survivor had undesirable characteristics—for example, they were 'weird' or they were 'fat'—then they were not believable. For example, @NerdeeNoPinata said, "bc no one would believe the fat chick" and @MelinaMeans tweeted, "Because who would have believed the weird girl over the cool popular guy. #NothingHasChanged". This construction reflects the literature on ideal victim types, where survivors are only believed if they exhibit traditional femininity (Christie, 1986; Foreman, 2015; Madriz, 1997). Thus, women who do not exhibit proper femininity are contravening female ideals and, as such, their credibility is diminished.

In contrast, men are constructed as truth tellers regardless of their flaws. Men's transgressions are explained away by focusing on their positive attributes. Being a 'good' man and a rapist do not coalesce; as such, if he is considered a good man he cannot be construed as a rapist. For instance, @loreleybee stated, "#BeenRapedNeverReported because 'he's such a great guy & you must be lying or you must have provoked/deserved it somehow'". The positive construction of men bolsters their credibility indicating that the survivor is the problem. This

reflects the literature on witness credibility in court. In particular, if it is ‘he said she said’ it becomes he said because her personal credibility is called into question while his is allowed to remain intact (Hartley, 2001). Thus, posters expand this finding to apply to interactions between men and women outside of a court setting.

Additionally, construing survivors as liars was purported through verbal interactions with others. In particular, posters mentioned constructing survivors in this fashion as a technique used by friends and the police. Friends dismissed the survivor by not believing them when they were told. For example, @hayleyminn said, “Because sometimes even your own ‘friends’ don’t believe you”. The survivor was not told directly that they were a liar; however, the reaction by friends after they were told construed the sexual assault narrative as something that did not happen. As such, the dismissal of the survivor’s story construes it as a lie.

In contrast, the survivors’ treatment by the police showcased the belief that the police thought survivors were lying even before they told them about the assault. This was depicted in the line of questioning used by the police as they were being told about the assault. Rather than asking the survivor about the assault or information about the perpetrator, questioning revolved around the survivor. For instance, @Chickee said, “Police interrogating the victim like they are the criminal”. The questioning is no longer about the assault, but about ascertaining the credibility of the survivor. This finding reflects the literature on police behaviour towards survivors as the literature indicates that a technique used by police to ascertain the veracity of assault claims is to interrogate the survivor (Quinlan, 2016).

The questioning of credibility is also reflected within the court process. Again, it is the survivor and her story under examination, while the perpetrator’s story goes unexamined. For example, @jolawrence131 said, “I didn’t want to be the one put on trial instead of the

perpetrator”. This treatment by the police is reflected in the literature that notes that sexual assault cases are thrown out based upon the survivor’s credibility (Randall, 2010). If the survivor is not credible then they are thought to be lying about what happened. The sexual assault trial becomes about the woman and whether she is credible enough to tell the truth rather than on whether or not she was sexually assaulted. As a result, they are not listened to, that silences survivors. For example, @ErrinWilliams said, “Having to convince people we are telling the truth keeps many of us silent”. It appears that the myth keeps women silent because their truth can stay intact if no one is able to hear it and dismantle it.

### Survivors as Truth Tellers

The tweets that resisted the myth also focused on survivors telling the truth about the assaults. The reporting tweets demonstrated that survivors are construed as liars; in contrast, resisting tweets constructed survivors as truth tellers.

Truth was constructed in the interactions between posters. In particular, posters validated the stories being shared on the hashtag. For example, @KT\_Diablo said, “I believe you”. As such, other posters supported survivors by seemingly creating an environment to break the silence around sexual assault. For example, @itstheDarcys stated, “Powerful & brave things are being shared at #BeenRapedNeverReported. The truth should never be dismissed”. The hashtag seemed to allow these voices to be linked together to amplify the survivors’ stories and empower their voices (Radsch & Khamis, 2013). As a result, this made it difficult to dismiss individual survivor’s stories because of the perceived interconnection between each story on the hashtag.

Additionally, posters used official statistics to deconstruct the myth. For example, @daphnesimone said, “Let’s counter w/ FACT: The rate of false report is in the range of 2% <http://www.sexualassault.ca/statistics.htm>”. Posters used statistics as proof to back up their claim that survivors do not lie about sexual assault. Furthermore, this myth was flipped to expose that false reporting is not the concern; rather, the problem is people not reporting at all. This position was reflected in the literature with regard to the discrepancy between sexual assaults reported to the police and those noted in the crime victimization surveys; where there are significantly higher number of assaults reported in the surveys (Brown & Walklate, 2012; Horvath & Brown, 2009). For example, @BexvanKoot stated, “Check out #BeenRapedNeverReported if you still think victims who don’t report can’t be believed. So many more women don’t report than do”. Posters deconstructed the myth by using the hashtag itself as representative of what they construed as the true issues surrounding sexual assault for survivors. As such, it provided an avenue for survivors to promote their truths around sexual assault.

Moreover, deconstructing the position that survivors falsely report is important because it unpacks and challenges the treatment survivors received within the criminal justice system. In particular, the system as a whole was criticized for its treatment of survivors. For example, @backonmylizzie said, “The justice system is not set up to make victims of assault feel safe or believed”. From this perspective, survivors are not liars; rather, the system casts doubt on and silences their voices. Since there is a presumption that survivors falsely accuse perpetrators, it seems that the court focuses on examining whether or not she is telling the truth. Resisting posts countered this construction by shifting the criticism away from the survivor’s truth to the perpetrator. This position is reflective of changes made within the criminal justice system towards an affirmative consent standard that requires the accused to prove there was reasonable

doubt (R v. Ewanchuk). Moreover, the tweets express that this shift towards the perpetrator is not only a focus on consent but represents a broader shift of how truth is considered within the courts. For example, @KimberlyDaum said, “She has to testify. Charter lets him stay silent. Only her truth is challenged. Would HIS truth survive cross exam”? Resisting posters demonstrated the ways in which the treatment of truth within sexual assault cases is gendered and they constructed this conduct toward women as an equality issue because women and men are treated differently.

At its core, resisting posters argued that the survivor’s narrative was truthful and that truth existed independent of determinations made within the courts. For example, @ElleDubyah said, “I reported, he was found not guilty. It still happened”. Truth and legal guilt were separated to accommodate the seemingly contrary position that even if the perpetrator was found to be not guilty this does not mean that the survivor was lying about the assault. As such, the court system was not depicted as finding out the truth about the assault but was merely construed as a source of determining legal guilt. For example, @HezykiahLucid said, “Knowing you do not have evidence beyond a reasonable doubt is not the same as not being raped”. This reflects the critical literature on the subject that indicates that sexual assault is not a court issue but a public problem (Muldoon, Taylor, & Norma, 2016). Comparable to the false positions of friends, family and police officers who reiterate the myth around survivors as liars, the court’s determination of guilt does not appear to have any bearing on the truth of the survivor’s narrative.

### Rape Myth no.3: Sexual assault is committed by a stranger

The third myth is that sexual assault is committed by a stranger. This myth was present within the critical literature that challenged the myth’s construction that sexual assault is a violent act committed by a stranger and is instead perpetrated by those known to the survivor

(Mason & Monckton-Smith, 2008; O'Hara, 2012). Some of the reporting tweets contrasted this literature illustrating the difficulty in considering the incident a sexual assault if committed by an intimate partner. For example, @AmandaDylina said, "I said 'no', but he didn't stop. I didn't know it was rape because he was my boyfriend. I thought it was allowed". As such, reporting tweets reflected the internalization of the myth and the seeming difficulty there is in considering acquaintances and intimate partners' rapists.

### Only Strangers Sexually Assault:

The myth resulted in a differentiation made between acquaintance rape and stranger rape. The relationship between the perpetrator and the survivor was a key component in constructing the interaction. In particular, posters discussed the internalized belief that 'real' rape occurs when it is committed by a stranger. For example, @snkatha2 said, "Bcos u believe the myth that 'rape rape' occurs when you're attacked by a stranger lurking in the bushes". Therefore, the posts seemed to reflect the difficulty in considering an assault rape if it does not fit the stranger typology.

As a result, sexual assault that occurs within a relationship was construed as impossible. This was constructed through the gender roles ascribed to women and men in dating relationships. The critical literature challenges the assumption that women's role in the relationship is to take care of their partner's needs; whereas men are dominant and assertive providers (Eagly & Wood, 1991). The tweets appear to illustrate that the woman caretaker role is a common belief placed upon the survivor by others. For example, @crazyleo1980 stated, "because he was my husband and I was taught women have to do what their husbands say". In contrast to the critical literature, gender roles are construed as a natural part of the relationship which ignores women's socialization into that role. Furthermore, this construction develops a

pathological need for women to take care of others. The behavior seems to expand to include her partner's sexual needs as a component of her caretaker role. For example, @bethomasand1 said, "Because it was my marital "duty" to have sex with him even if I didn't want to". As a result, if she tries to say 'no' then she is failing in her wifely/partner duties. Thus, the sexual assault is explained away as it is the woman's fault for failing to fulfill her role.

Importantly, this appears to impact women's ability to come forward after an assault because they construe the behavior as part of a normal intimate relationship. For example, @JentotheDen stated, "Because I was married and didn't realize it was rape". As such, they do not view what occurred as rape but as the 'natural' result of failing to uphold their gendered duties. This conceptualization was reflected in the literature in regards to women who contravene gender roles. In the feminist literature, theorists critique the perpetuation of gender roles based upon the premise that women are penalized or punished for acting outside of their prescribed roles (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007). As such, the posts seem to reflect this sentiment as women who contravene their caretaker role appear to be blamed for the assault.

Furthermore, it seems that women themselves internalize this socialization and caretaking of their partner's sexual needs and do so at a young age. As Berger (2014) notes, the normalization of dominant gender constructions leads to the internalization of this behaviour (Breger, 2014) For instance, @KiraaDarling said, "because I was 14 and that's what girlfriends do, just lie there and take whatever". This is constructed as women losing their agency over their bodies when they enter a relationship. Instead of women being in control of their bodies, it seems that their partners are in control. They no longer have a voice; it is the partner who speaks for them. This loss of control has a particular influence on consent as consent is commonly constructed as both people in the interaction saying that they agree to sexual relations. If an

intimate male partner speaks for a woman, then he also speaks her consent. Therefore, it seems impossible for her to be sexually assaulted as she no longer retains the ability to say ‘no’. The challenge with women having their ‘no’ heard and respected is reflective of the difficulty college campuses have had in implementing affirmative consent policies (Shafer, Ortiz, Thompson & Huemmer, 2018). However, the findings in the current thesis take this further as it is not merely that men are trying to take a ‘no’ and make it a ‘yes’, it is that they are saying ‘yes’ on behalf of their partners.

#### Perpetrators Known to the Survivor:

Resisting tweets appeared to directly challenge the myth by indicating that posters knew the perpetrator before they were sexually assaulted. For example, @merstew said, “Have you noticed the majority of victims knew the perpetrators? It’s generally not the ‘stranger in the alley’ myth”. Importantly, deconstructing the myth, specifically, the relationship within the stranger-perpetrator dyad opened up space for who could be considered a perpetrator. Resisting posters did not seem to adopt a particular perpetrator typology. This encouraged a wide definition of what could be construed as sexual assault. For instance, @TorontoSpectatr said, “What these experiences makes clear is that rapists are not easily identifiable in advance. It could be anyone”. Thus, the expansion of this definition indicated that sexual assault can occur in intimate relationships. For example, @ccarmijo11 said, “It’s rape even when it’s your partner”. This parallels the findings within quantitative studies that stipulate that sexual assault is predominantly committed by someone known to the survivor (Deming et al., 2013).

Resisting posters highlighted the primacy of the survivor’s voice and her ability to communicate her consent to her partner. This communication seems to indicate that the relationship between the survivor and the perpetrator prior to the assault is irrelevant as to

whether or not a sexual assault happened. As such, this constructs sexual assault as a possibility at any stage of a relationship. For example, @ZebraPrintMom said, “Just bcuz you’re in a relationship with him doesn’t mean it’s not rape. No means no. I believe you bcuz it’s me 2”. Therefore, resisting tweets appear to acknowledge that women retain their bodily agency when they enter into an intimate relationship. The construction of agency is premised on the survivor’s voice; that is, a woman’s ‘no’ is always valid and should be respected by the other person regardless of whether it is her boyfriend/husband/partner.

In addition, the relative power between the perpetrator and the survivor was discussed. The perpetrator was construed as having power over the survivor and using this influence to keep the survivor silent after the assault had occurred. For example, @wordwoman said, “For the girls who are raped by men they should be able to trust. Girls who never forget. Men who are never punished”. Furthermore, the perpetrator seemed to manipulate the relationship between them in order to take advantage of the survivor. This position construed the perpetrator as at fault for the assault as they were depicted as coercing the survivor into the action. This conceptualization reflects the position of feminist organizations that contend that sexual assault is the result of power imbalances between men and women (ORCC, 2018).

Posters of resisting tweets also discussed gender roles in general and the caretaker role in particular. Although, not all resisting tweets constructed sexual assault in the same ways reporting tweets did. While reporting tweets acknowledged that these were underlying internalized beliefs, resisting tweets showcased purposive actions that the survivor knowingly took on to protect the family and/or intimate relationship. For example, @MistyElena, “Because I didn’t want to ruin his life the way he did mine...I loved him”. While the resisting posters acknowledged what happened to them was sexual assault, protecting the family unit and

performing this caretaker role appeared to trump the individual survivor's feelings about the assault. For instance, @PshawP stated, "Because I was ten years old, he was my mother's boyfriend. She was sad enough already". These actions seem to suggest that the imperative to be a caretaker that is embedded in gender roles is a powerful silencing mechanism and that a woman's mandate to foster relationships can come at the detriment of her own person. Even when survivors are able to acknowledge that they can be sexually assaulted by someone other than a stranger, gender constraints of maintaining familial relationships cause barriers to talking about the assault. The literature acknowledges the effects that sexual scripts have on women and men and have proposed strategies to mitigate the impact (Rossetto & Tollison, 2017). The tweets seemed to reflect the literature on sexual scripts that indicates that the family is an important socializing agent that has a strong influence on gender. The literature notes that children model the gender dynamics they are exposed to in childhood (Bornstein, Mortimer, Lutfey, & Bradley, 2010). As such, it seems that gender dynamics that women are exposed to within their family continue to have a significant impact on later behaviour as it pertains to women's caretaker role.

#### Rape Myth no.4: Sexual assault is just sex, it is not violence

The fourth myth is that sexual assault is just sex and not violence. This myth was present within the literature that argues that violence is sexualized within Western society (Buchwald et al., 1993; Ullman, 2010). Importantly, reporting tweets discussed the impact of the survivor's attractiveness on her believability. For example, @HashtagReasons said, "Because I was the fat girl and he was The Hot guy, and I thought people would think I was lucky". Reporting tweets indicated that the myth seemed to have become an internalized belief of the survivor.

### Sexual Assault is Just Sex:

Reporting tweets focused on posters' experiences having the sexual aspect of the sexual assault as the focus and the assaultive behavior of the act ignored. For instance, @jackiesteeves stated, "The cab driver said 'smile, gorgeous, you probably gave him the best night of his life'". This myth was constructed in the way other people reacted towards the survivor when they were told about the assault. In particular, it was the physical attributes of the perpetrator that impacted how others reacted to the assault. If the perpetrator was seen as physically attractive, then they were constructed as being unable to sexually assault others. This position is based on the belief that the sex should be consensual because people should want to sleep with them. For example, @ReneeLPelletier said, "Sharing so others will too. I was 12. Told a friend. She said I was lucky because he was hot". Rather than the behaviour being depicted as assaultive, the survivor was instead construed as 'lucky' to have been able to be physically intimate with that person. This position reflects the literature on the attractiveness of the perpetrator that indicates that those who are more attractive were seen as less culpable for the assault in comparison to their unattractive counterparts (Angelone et al., 2009; Erian et al., 1998).

While the literature on the attractiveness of perpetrator focused on specific scenarios (court process) (Angelone et al., 2009; Erian et al., 1998), the tweets expanded this construction to indicate that there was a broadly held view that attractive people do not commit sexual assault. This seems to suggest that only 'unattractive' people can be perpetrators of sexual assault because it presumes that everyone will willingly have sex with someone who is attractive. As a result, survivors are conditioned to feel unable to say 'no' to people who are attractive.

This construction was also depicted in the inverse: that only attractive survivors can be sexually assaulted because if you are not attractive, it is perceived that people do not want to

partake in sexual activities with you. For example, @HezykiahLucid said, “Goes with you’re not attractive so it cannot be rape because you’re not worthy of being raped”. Through constructing sexual assault as sex, only those depicted as desirable as sexual partners are determined to be able to be raped. This conceptualization was reflected in the critical literature that challenged the association made between the attractiveness of the survivor and her culpability for the assault (Clarke & Stermac, 2011). The literature in this area has produced contrary positions, the posts seemed to support the theorization that people deemed unattractive are unable to be sexually assaulted. However, the reasoning behind this construction in the literature and the posts differed. In the literature the unattractive survivor is perceived as having seduced their attacker (DeJong, 1999); in contrast, posters constructed the survivor as undesirable based upon her physical characteristics rather than her actions.

Additionally, the myth was promoted by others in the manner in which they construed sex. Sex seemed to be depicted by others as enacted on the body of the survivor. Importantly, men placed their desires and the desires of other men onto these bodies. For example, @SharonDanley said, “Age 13, male friend insists I let his friend ‘play’ with me so he can know what sex is like”. Since men place their will on the body there appeared to be no place for the girl’s/woman’s voice in the interaction. Her desires are construed as irrelevant as it is solely the body that men are interacting with. As such, the women’s personhood disappears within this conceptualization. For instance, @Carregonnen stated, “18 and set up by my boyfriend to let his best mate ‘have a go’”. It appears that she herself is invisible except for the way in which men talk about and use her body. Therefore, a sexual assault does not seem to have occurred because men have already placed the agreement for sex onto the body.

Thus, sexual assault is not depicted as an assault but is framed as sexual activity. The assaultive aspect is construed as just sex or just bad sex. For instance, @HanaShafi stated, “I, like many other women, was so normalized to the idea that abusive sex was really just ‘one bad night’”. The assaultive behaviour inherent within the actions is explained away in the definition of the behavior, as sex is never referred in relation to any type of violence. This finding contrasts the argument made within the feminist literature that sexual assault is a form of violence used by men to control women (Davies & True, 2015; Russo & Pirlott, 2006). For the posts, the language around sex appears to explain away assaultive behavior by defining it in terms so that sex is always seen as consensual.

#### Sexual Assault is Violence:

In contrast, resisting tweets focused on the violence within sexual assault rather than sexual relations. In particular, posters noted that the initial assault was not a separate act but represented part of a continuum of violence experienced by the survivor at the hands of the perpetrator. For example, @FrankPSkeletor said, “Because I’ll kill you and no one will find out or care is a believable statement to an 8 year old”. As the tweet illustrates, posters discussed escalating violence resulting from the survivor discussing the assault.

Furthermore, the sexual assault is not constructed as sexual activity but is instead viewed as a violent tool used by the perpetrator to assert power and control over the survivor. For example, @SascOttawa states, “Sexual violence is about power and control NOT about desire”. The perpetrator is able to control the survivor’s bodily autonomy through these threats as they comply with the demands to avoid the ensuing violence. In particular, this was used when the survivor knew the perpetrator before the assault occurred as the perpetrator could continue to keep in contact with the survivor. It appears that power and control was not only exerted over the

survivor's physical body but communication after the assault was also used to sustain this power. For instance, @ekirb12 stated, "A friend has #beenrapedneverreported because the rapist's friends threatened to kill her if she went to the police". Moreover, additional violent actions were not needed to retain the perpetrator's power over the survivor as the threats were determined to be real. This is reflective of the literature on domestic violence that construes violence as a mechanism to control a partner (Ehrensaft, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Heyman, O'Leary, & Lawrence, 1999). The posters expanded this concept to include interactions occurring outside of intimate relationships, suggesting that sexual violence against women is normalized outside the home as well as inside the home.

The tweets seemed to indicate that, while the assault may have lasted a moment, the violence that occurred through this interaction had a long term impact on the survivor. For example, @elisahategan expressed this sentiment: "In the context of a lifetime, the event lasts a moment. The aftermath lasts forever". In particular, the fear that accompanies the violence links to the temporality of the assault as the sexual assault comes back into the consciousness of the survivor. This was constructed in regards to flashbacks and nightmares. For example, @SismoGirl said, "Horrific nightmares last week because of my first rape at 15. Statute of limitations? BS. I'll be forever haunted". Rather than the assault holding its place in the past, the assault continues to snap into the present consciousness of the survivor over time. Therefore, the assault is not about the sex at all but is framed around the trauma incurred after the incident due to the violence the survivor experienced. For instance, @susiep2003 stated, "Because women are scared...even 25 years later". As a result, it is the ongoing emotional hardship surrounding the assault that impacts the survivor over time.

### Rape Myth no. 5: If the victim drinks alcohol that is consent to sexual relations

While rape myth no. 4 focused on the attractiveness of the perpetrator and survivor and its impact on consent, rape myth no. 5 explicated the relationship between consent and alcohol use. The survivor's use of alcohol prior to the assault as indicative of providing consent was often critiqued in the literature (Burt, 1980; Horvath & Brown, 2009; O'Hara, 2012; Ullman, 2010). The reporting tweets revolved around how the myth impacted the poster without challenging the myth itself. For example, @RaavynnDigitaL discussed the impact of the myth, "I've #BeenRapedNeverReported because I knew I would be blamed because I had been drinking". As such, posters did not necessarily support the myth, rather, their tweets focused on the effect the myth had on the poster.

### Posters Constructed Fault in Relation to the Survivor

Both resisting and reporting tweets focused on the ways consuming alcohol prior to the assault related to determining consent. Resisting tweets seemed to absolve the survivor of blame, for example, @LaurRyan said, "If u r in presence of drunk female, get them home safely, DONT take advantage". In contrast, reporting tweets reflected the blame posters attributed to themselves and was placed on to them that replicated the belief that drinking would mean the assault would be constructed as the survivor's fault.

In particular, consent was construed as a moment of verbal negotiation, because of the perceived reduction in the person's ability to communicate is seen by posters as a loss of agency. For example, @l\_e\_r\_ noted, "Didn't know if in my drugged state I said Yes? Had I agreed to it? Don't remember it". Reporting tweets suggest that, since the intoxicated survivor lacks the ability to communicate or to remember her communication during the assault, this can lead to her inability to speak about consent after the assault. Since the communication is framed (by others

(i.e. friends) and survivors themselves) in relation to the survivor's agency, the choice to drink alcohol is framed as an irresponsible one. The literature does not label drinking as 'irresponsible', although the sentiment is reflected in the findings that indicate higher levels of blame placed on survivors who drink versus those that did not prior to the assault (Benedet, 2010). As a result, the survivor is unable to discuss the assault afterward because there is a reduction in the credibility of her speech.

Credibility is key in establishing legal responsibility (Sperry & Siegel, 2013). This was depicted in reporting posters' discussions about police. @TeaKittyLB's tweet is typical: "The one time I did report it, was Xmas eve. I was torn – literally. Police said it was my fault for having a drink". Even when there is physical proof of the assault, alcohol use is construed as the overriding factor in determining consent, that is a finding reflected in the literature (Freeman et al., 2015; Jozkowski & Wiersma, 2015). The focus on alcohol seems to create difficulties in attaining a conviction for the assault as the survivor's credibility as a witness able to discuss the assault after the fact is questioned because of the alcohol use. As critiqued in the literature, it is the survivor's actions that are under investigation rather than the perpetrators (Quinlan, 2016).

The focus on survivors is important as the data suggests that the construction of alcohol use by police is different for survivors than it is for perpetrators. For example, @MelinderNorris described the dissimilar treatment of the survivor and the perpetrator: "Here goes, 1st one age 13, I DID report but no charges filed (police said rapists & I were '3 victims of alcohol')". While the perpetrator appears to be absolved of his actions after imbibing, the survivor is responsible for what occurs when she is drinking.

As a result, posters linked alcohol use to blame because the survivor is constructed as responsible for her inability to communicate consent during the assault. This blame for the

assault stemmed from others they told about the assault but was also internalized at the time of the assault. For example, @angepantz tweeted, “I was 14 and had drank 2 beers, he was 16 and sober. I thought it was my fault for drinking” and @DoubleBubble199 stated, “I have #BeenRapedNeverReported because I had been drinking and my friends told me that I probably told him yes when I was blacked out”. The underlying implication seems to be that if the survivor was sober she would have been able to effectively communicate her lack of consent. Interestingly, this tweet suggests that consent, if given by a non-drunk woman, would be respected, that contrasts research that posits that sexual assault is a form of violence (Bunch, 2006; Walsh, 2015), misogyny (Bunch, 2006) and control (Buchhandler-Raphael, 2011).

#### Posters Attribute Fault to the Perpetrator

The tweets that resisted the myth also focused on the relationship between the survivor’s alcohol use prior to the assault and her ability to communicate consent. The reporting tweets focused on the survivor’s inebriation prior to the assault, while resistive tweets flipped this to place the attention on the perpetrator’s actions.

Once again, consent was constructed as a communicative exchange between participating parties, but in these tweets, alcohol was depicted as a strategy intentionally used by perpetrators to bypass this discursive exchange because it reduced the survivors’ articulability. For example, @anabellebf noted, “They got us so drunk we could barely walk, my best friend and I. Let alone consent”. From this perspective, alcohol is a weapon because the survivor is unable to articulate her consent and as a result is unable to report her own agency. The literature on alcohol use has focused primarily on attributions of blame (Benedet, 2010) towards survivors or the impact on their credibility within the criminal justice system (Randall, 2010). However, feminist publications (Ms. Magazine) and organizations (Mom’s Fight Back) have described alcohol as a

weapon and have challenged the assertion that the agency and desire of the perpetrator should override the agency and desire of the survivor.

Posters resisted this construction by highlighting the perpetrator's responsibility. For example, @djadelaney said, "1,2,3,4...Alcohol is not an excuse for not listening to 'no'". Resistive tweets also indicated that women should be able to drink alcohol without it overriding their ability to say 'yes' or 'no'—in particular, if they are not able to say 'yes' because of alcohol, then that is automatically a 'no'. Consequently, posters condemned perpetrators' use of alcohol to sidestep survivors' speech by indicating that communication between parties to determine consent was still needed even when intoxicated. Therefore, if an inebriated woman is unable to speak, then it is construed that they are unable to give consent.

As with other resistive tweets, these comments place responsibility for the assault on the perpetrator and not on the survivor, and underscore that the onus is on the perpetrator to ensure that he obtains the other person's consent as a way of respecting that person's sexual agency. For instance, @garossino tweeted, "If a man knows a woman has been drinking, taking drugs, the onus should shift to HIM to prove she's consenting". As a result, this takes the blame away from the survivor and shifts the attention to the perpetrator. It is the actions of the perpetrator that are important rather than the women's alcohol use. As mentioned with the reporting tweets, this has an important impact on legal responsibility as the perpetrator and his actions are analyzed instead of the survivor's. The court's approach statutorily as outlined in the literature is to place the onus on the perpetrator to ensure that he has taken 'reasonable steps' to ensure consent (Randall, 2010). This responsibility is important as it puts the perpetrator who goes ahead when she's drunk under the microscope instead of the other way around. The critical literature places the focus on the perpetrator and his actions before the assault (Randall, 2010), and the perpetrator is

also central in the recent case law surrounding sexual assault (R v. Ewanchuk; R v. Park; Benedet, 2010, 2014; Last, 1999). However, this shift has not been seamless, as depicted with reporting tweets and noted within the literature, there is continued difficulty in attaining convictions for sexual assault because of enduring beliefs of women's alcohol use being construed as consent to sex (Randall, 2010).

Rape myth no. 6: When women say 'no' they really mean 'yes'.

Rape myth no. 5 and no. 6 both discuss consent and the parameters surrounding articulating consent. Rape myth no. 6, the myth that women mean 'yes' when they say 'no', was present in the literature. In particular, the literature critiques the differential sexual scripts for women and men, specifically that it is women's responsibility to clearly identify when it is a 'no' and the limits on what will happen (Buchwald et al., 1993; Horvath & Brown, 2009). Reporting tweets depicted posters' experiences of having their 'no' manipulated by the perpetrator. For example, @Deswhite6 said, "He threatened suicide if I said no". This expanded the dialogue past 'yes' and 'no' to the actions that influence the verbal exchange.

Women's Voices Disempowered:

Posters constructed women's consent in relation to their ability to use their voice and say 'yes' in the interaction. In particular, women were construed as being unable to use their voice to say 'no' because male perpetrators turned a 'no' into a 'yes'. For example, @HashtagReasons said, "Because I gave up trying to tell him no after the 30<sup>th</sup> time he asked and I felt guilty". Therefore, it is not necessarily that 'no' means 'yes', it is that 'no' does not mean 'no'. Although yes and no are placed on a binary, if 'yes' is construed to mean there is agreement to sex and 'no' means keep asking, the woman's 'no' defaults to 'yes' over time so long as the perpetrator persists.

Moreover, within the tweets posters noted that perpetrators used coercive methods that operated through their power over the survivor to make them say 'yes'. This finding is reflective of the literature on the myth that acknowledges a normalization of men as sexual pursuers (Horvath & Brown, 2009). Problematically, the tweets indicate that men use whatever means necessary in order to gain women's compliance to sexual relations. For instance, @p0lygenes1s said, "He would always push me, complain & get angry until I gave in. 'No' meant nothing. But who'd believe that". As such, the perpetrator is construed as not sexually assaulting the survivor because she technically said 'yes' to the sexual relations after being coerced. Therefore, it appears that the survivor's voice is used against her in order to control her bodily agency. The same voice that can dictate what happens to her body is coerced to always say 'yes' because yes is in the perpetrator's interest.

Furthermore, posters acknowledged how women are positioned as gatekeepers to sex, and it is accordingly women's responsibility to determine whether or not sex will occur. This finding has been illustrated in the onus placed on women to say 'no' (Buchwald et al., 1993). Despite the shift towards affirmative consent from 'no' to 'yes', the interaction is constructed as the woman's choice to allow the sexual relations to happen rather than as a coercive act of the perpetrator. For example, @me\_goulet said, "Let him do it after saying no more than 10 times. Wanted to go home and be safe. Later told by a friend no means yes". As a result, even when the choice is constrained and a woman's 'no' is not respected, sexual access to her body still seems to be in her control and she is still positioned as if she has the ability to say 'no'. This finding has been found within the literature as a critique of affirmative consent standards as it fails to address when the 'yes' is not freely given (Buchhandler-Raphael, 2011).

The difficulty with this myth is that it reinforces the perception that it is the responsibility of the woman to communicate her consent rather than her lack of consent. However, when she does say 'no', it is construed as her playing 'hard to get'. The sexual assault is explained away as there is always something more the woman can do to properly articulate her 'no' because simply saying 'no' does not mean 'no'. From this perspective, 'no' must mean 'yes' because the woman does not use violence or force to make 'no' meaningful. Furthermore, the voices of women are not enough to qualify whether or not they want to engage in sexual relations. They must also use their bodies to physically convey their 'no' and their resistance to sex. For instance, @Soylent81 stated, "One victim of date rape I know blamed herself because she 'didn't fight hard enough'" and @treblepower said, "I was ashamed and thought it was my fault for not fighting hard enough". The tweets depict an internalization of the myth that the posters construct the assault as their responsibility because the assault seems to be their fault for not physically stopping it from happening.

Once again, the tweets seem to indicate that women's bodies are not their own but are instead enacted upon by other people. This creates contrary constructions as on one hand, women are supposed to control their bodies and be the gatekeepers of sexual interactions while on the other, if they do engage in sexual activity, women appear to 'owe' men their sexuality. For example, @pgzwicker said, "As a woman you come to understand you have some sort of debt to pay, always, just for being a sexual being". Since men are supposed to be sexually dominant, when women try and exercise control of their own bodies it violates the social norm that their bodies are owed to men. As a result, they are unable to say 'no' because sexual activity has already been agreed to through social norms. Women are constructed as constantly open to sexual activity that in turn means they are unable to say 'no' in the interaction.

The reporting tweets indicate that ‘no’ means ‘yes’ is not something that is conveyed by women, but is constructed through men’s interpretation of women’s behaviour. All of the female posters’ tweets reaffirm that women do not mean ‘yes’ when they say ‘no’, but that men are translating women’s speech in ways that are consistent with men’s own desires. For example, @SuperBelleBlake said, “Because I said No, but he decided it was a yes”. As a result, the sexual assault seems to be explained away through the use of women’s voices. This perspective counters the literature on the subject that sees women’s silence as passive and disempowering (Ryan-Flood & Gill, 2010). The data suggests that women’s speech and voice can also be disempowered because men manipulate the meaning of the dialogue/interaction for their personal gain.

#### Empowering Women’s Voices:

Once again, consent was a clear theme in the posters’ discussions around this myth. Importantly, there was a shift away from using ‘no’ within the exchange to move towards saying ‘yes’. This shift reflects the logic within radical feminist literature that sexual activity is not permissible until someone says ‘yes’ (Friedman & Valenti, 2008). This position takes the onus off the survivor to say ‘no’ in the interaction, and places the onus on the perpetrator to ensure that the survivor is saying ‘yes’. For instance, @ZaimalA stated, “Just seen #BeenRapedNeverReported. This is why @RTNNottingham is important & why I will be marching. Only yes means yes”. Importantly, although the reporting tweets lament the fact that consent is seen to be the responsibility of the woman, resisting tweets seem to affirm that both people in the interaction need to consent.

Moreover, from this perspective, one ‘no’ is sufficient. There is no need to say it louder, or say it multiple times, or qualify it with any other action. For example, @theRElife said, “It

doesn't matter if you know him or not. No means no". Importantly, this also dictates the meaning of the word. 'No' *only* means 'no', and cannot be interpreted as anything else in this context. The words of the survivor have enough weight to stand on their own and the words cannot be manipulated to mean anything else. Therefore, this construction allowed survivors to reclaim their voices as their own words were construed as worthy of being listened to and respected.

Furthermore, consent was premised on the survivor's ability to communicate her desires. Posters depicted consent as only possible through verbal iterations. If there was no communication or if the survivor was unable to communicate, the presumption was that she did not consent. For example, @FlynnAlone said, "quit trying to fight back after years of abuse...Becoming too scared to say no is not consent" and @finehamabounds said, "#beenrapedneverreported because I'm not sure he knew it was rape but being physically unable to say no doesn't mean it defaults to yes". In the context of resisting tweets, the coercion that was lamented or explained away in reporting tweets is depicted as manipulative. As such, sex that occurs based on consent that is the result of manipulation is viewed as sexual assault. This position reflects feminist literature that acknowledges if coercion is used when providing consent, it is sexual assault. As a result, the onus shifts to the perpetrator to ensure that the sex was consensual (Gotell, 2008).

As such, being able to say 'no' was linked to the survivor's ability to retain agency over her body. Women reclaimed their bodily agency by communicating what happens to their body and expecting that these words were enough to have their choices respected. For example, @PorcelainTear said, "The only one that has the right to your body is YOU and no one else! Never allow anyone to convince you otherwise" and @HollyZissman said, "I speak out for all

the girls like me who didn't know their 'no's' were valid, that they were & still are valid". As such, sexual assault was construed as a violation of women's discursive autonomy. This position was reflected in critical literature that depicts the reclamation of women's voices as a form of empowerment (Friedman & Valenti, 2008).

#### Rape Myth no. 7: If the victim dresses provocatively that is consent to sexual relations

Rape myth no. 7 follows the focus of the last two rape myths where the discussion revolves around consent. The link between the dress and clothing of the survivor and consent was often critiqued in the literature (Burt, 1980; Foreman, 2015; Horvath & Brown, 2009; O'Hara, 2012; Shariff & DeMartini, 2015). Both reporting and resisting tweets focused on the importance of words when it comes to placing blame for the assault. However, where resisting tweets focused on the (need for) dialogue between the perpetrator and the survivor during the assault, reporting tweets focused on the dialogue others told the survivor post-assault.

#### Clothing as Consent:

The police played a particularly important role in this dialogue, because tweeters seemed to feel police actions post-assault focused on clothing as a way to place blame on the survivor. For example, @LostWolf1979 tweeted, "Because the first question they ask when you report is 'What were YOU wearing/doing.'". As such, survivor's actions prior to the assault (i.e. what they were wearing) was of primary importance in this dialogue. The survivor's dress also overrode other factors, such as the age of the survivor, as determinative when it came to victim-blaming. For example, @pureivorydotca notes, "The first thing the cops asked was "what was I wearing?" And i ran out in tears. I was 13-he was 35". Importantly, posters were impacted by the myth starting at a young age and as illustrated within the tweet, there were discrepancies between

the age of the survivor and the perpetrator. This purports that there are age-based power dynamics at play that could have an influence on the assault; yet, the authorities seem to overlook this potential influence.

Furthermore, tweeters indicated that, given the status of the officer as an authority figure, and the power differential between the survivor and the investigating officer, the police officer's construction of dress as an enticement to assault (regardless of age) worked to shut down any resistive speech acts on the part of the survivor. For instance, @compalena states, "I was 6 the first time I was raped. Police asked me what I was wearing to entice my attacker. Never reported again". This construction of the meaning of dress as enticement accordingly worked to silence the survivor by implicitly putting 'control' over the assault in her hands: i.e. had the survivor dressed differently the assault would have been prevented.

As Gracia (2004) notes, the systemic nature of victim blaming is a barrier for women to discuss violence. As such, their choice about using their voice is constrained by others (Gracia, 2004). My findings reflect the impact that interactions with others appear to have on survivors' ability to speak. The literature focuses on the systemic nature of victim blaming, in contrast, the data seemed to underline that victim blaming alone did not reduce their agency; rather it was the power and status of who the survivor was speaking to, combined with words of victim blaming, which served to impede upon their agency. This seeming lack of agency is indicated by the impact speaking to the police had on the survivor. As such, the positionality of the person placing the blame is an important consideration in how victim blaming impacts the survivor's agency.

### Words Affirming Consent:

The tweets that resisted this myth focused on the importance of using words to affirm consent in spite of dress. For example, @FlynnAlone tweeted, “clothes can’t give consent only words can”. As such, posters constructed consent as a purposive choice of the survivor that requires verbal confirmation rather than as a passive act that can be assumed from dress. The focus on words also underscores the importance of consent as an interaction between two people, facilitated through dialogue. The people in the interaction are given choice through their words to determine whether they will engage in sexual relations or not. From this perspective, both parties in the interaction have sexual agency as words offer a direct means to communicate their decision.

This construction of consent as interactive and verbal rejects the notion of victim-blaming embedded within the myth. This is consistent with a larger theme that recurs across myths that rejects victim-blaming on the basis of alcohol, location, etc. For example, @cassiesuxx tweeted “to all you beautiful people ... nothing you did, wore, drank, said, where went, who with; NOTHING makes it your fault.”. This tweet underscores that nothing the survivor did before the assault can justify the assault itself because only words can provide consent. As @mdperrinco puts it, “clothes can’t give consent. only words can. #nomore #victimshaming #rapeisnotabouttheclothesyouwear”. This constructs the survivor not as an object that was enacted upon but rather as a person whose sexual agency was violated.

Women’s use of words as a strategy of resistance is reflected in the literature on violence against women. Hollander (2009) discussed the barriers to studying women’s self-defence. In particular, she noted that there was an underlying belief that women are unable to protect themselves against men’s violence. However, her work on this subject contrasted this belief as

women effectively used their voice to prevent violence. As a result, voice was used by women to assert their choice for themselves (Hollander, 2009). The current findings indicate that women use words as a way of showing to others that they have agency. Instead of using words for reclaiming personal agency, the interactional component in constructing consent implies that they are reclaiming voice so that others are aware of their bodily agency.

#### Rape Myth no. 8: Men who are aroused have to have sex

Rape myth no. 8 focused on the link between women's bodily agency and voice. The myth that men who are aroused have to have sex was discussed in the literature in relation to sexual scripts and critiquing the imperative for men to aggressively pursue their sexual desires (Horvath & Brown, 2009). The reporting tweets did not reflect the literature but instead focused on posters experiences, specifically with regard to their voices being ignored. For instance, @StaceyWaugh55 said, "#beenrapedneverreported nov 28/81. Said no. He didn't care. Still haunted by it". As such, posters reporting tweets seemed to reflect the assertion that aroused men have to have sex.

#### Men's Desires over Women's Voices:

Reporting tweets construed women's bodies as lacking agency because their voices are ignored by men. For example, @MissSelize said, "I had said three times that I didn't want to have sex. He got excited and had to do it. I only cried the first time". From this perspective, voice seems to be lost because it is trumped by physical acts that directly counter her voice because no one is listening. As a result, women lose their ability to express their lack of consent because their voice is irrelevant in whether or not the sexual relations will occur.

Furthermore, the literature critiqued the ‘common-sense’ notion that depicts sexual desire as an inherent part of maleness; that is based on the belief that, sex without consent fulfills a natural biological urge (Ryan, 2011). The tweets contrast this criticism, as posters seemed to internalize the belief that women’s wishes should be discounted in favor of fulfilling men’s sexual needs. For example, @JudeBurger said, “Me to #beenrapedneverreported – I had been taught my rights were not as important as their desires”. Instead of balancing the expressed desires of both parties, it is men’s desires that are important. This perspective did not come from the survivor but was a viewpoint placed on to her from other people. As a result, a woman’s right to choose what happens to her own body is subsumed by men’s desires.

Rather than viewing women as equals participating in a consensual experience, they are considered objects of desire and areas for conquest. For example, @evolaimiee said, “He told me I was girl 14 of a 30 day challenge he had set for himself even when I begged him to stop”. Therefore, men’s sexual desires are viewed as natural and their aggressive means used to pursue sexual activity is construed as a rational way to achieve their needs. For example, @Crystallioasis said, “At 17, he was too horny to stop. At 19, I was too sick to make love. He still didn’t care. So why would anyone else?”. The desires of the survivor are not considered and she becomes a body to act upon rather than an active part of the interaction. The urges that men have are viewed as too strong to stop, as such, there is a lack of responsibility placed on to the perpetrator because they cannot help their biological pursuits. This construction of men’s aggressive pursuit of sexual needs is a perspective that has been challenged by critical literature as a myth to justify men’s aggression (Ryan, 2011).

Men's and Women's Needs Are Equal:

While reporting tweets lamented that women do not have agency over their bodies, resisting tweets promoted women's agency and bodily control. In particular, female posters expressly asserted their ownership over their own bodies. For example, @KarmaJonez said, "Men must rid themselves of the notion that a woman's body is theirs for the taking. My body is MINE". Therefore, women established agency by reclaiming bodily independence. Their bodies are not enacted upon for other people's desires but that they have control over who is interacting with their body.

Furthermore, posters tweeted out to men and called upon them to consider the needs of the survivor. For instance, @FlynnAlone stated, "if you've ever put your need for sex above her, exhaustion, hunger, pain, need to care for children #YouAreARapist". Posters challenged the myth by indicating that men can control their need for sex. Men's ability to control themselves was framed in regards to equality between men and women as the tweets tried to challenge the dominance men's desires have had over women. As such, women and what they need must be considered equally as important as men's needs.

Posters seemed to identify a need for men to control their bodily urges. The sexual acts committed on women's bodies were not depicted as natural male urges but were instead seen as a personal failing in controlling their bodies. For example, @ajavu13 said, "A guy I just started dating decided to take by violent force something he could've gotten with my consent later on". At issue is that women's bodies are taken without their permission. Men have a lack of control over their body resulting in the sexual assault of women. Therefore, it is men who are at fault and responsible for their bodily urges. For instance, @Taka\_1r5d2 stated, "Most importantly it is to educate how to cultivate self-control. NOT to educate how to avoid being raped". Interestingly, it

is not the perpetrator's character that is called into question but is about impulse control. This construction reflects the literature on sexual assault prevention that targets men's attitude change and behavior change (Foubert, Godin, & Tatum, 2010).

Rape Myth no. 9: If the victim flirts with the perpetrator than they have agreed to sexual relations.

The victim flirting with the perpetrator was a myth discussed in the literature. The research put forward that survivors are more likely to be blamed for the assault if they flirted with the perpetrator before the assault (Foreman, 2015; Horvath & Brown, 2009). This myth seemed to have an impact on posters, as reporting tweets discussed the internalization of the myth.

In particular, posters reflected the assertion within the literature that if the survivor flirted before the assault they are to blame. However, within the literature this blame was placed by others on to the survivor (Foreman, 2015; Horvath & Brown, 2009), while the tweets indicate that the survivors blamed themselves for the assault. For example, @Mamasanna said, "Because I thought it was my fault, that I shouldn't have led him on". If the survivor flirted with the perpetrator, the survivor absolved the perpetrator from any blame as they attributed the assault to her own actions.

Furthermore, the internalization of the myth placed attention on the survivor's actions prior to the assault; this seemed to impact her credibility to discuss the assault after it had happened. For instance, @PennyPiquant stated, "Hard to admit this applies to me. He was my bf's roommate. I was promiscuous. I figured I wouldn't be believed". The responsibility for the assault is placed on to the survivor from an engrained belief that if she flirted, she must have wanted to have sex. Her lack of credibility surrounding the sexual assault seems to create doubt

about whether an assault occurred that serves to explain away the assault. As a result, if there is flirting then there is no assault.

### Flirting is not Consent

Given the small sample of resisting tweets it was not feasible to find any substantive themes. However, it should be noted that resisting posts challenged the view that flirting equates to consent. For example, @Ms\_Wind tweeted, “If you’re attracted 2 him, you’ve agreed to sex. If u dress sexy, you’ve agreed 2 sex. #ThisIsCalledEquality?”. As such, the posters seemed to challenge the link between flirting and consent in that flirting behaviour does not equate to consent.

### Rape Myth no. 10: The victim says yes once; it is always a yes

The tweets surrounding the myth that if you agree to sex once then it is always a yes contrasted the position within the critical literature that argues there is not an association between previous sexual encounters and automatic consent (Bell et al., 1994; Brown & Walklate, 2012; Monson et al., 1996). The tweets reflected the sentiment that survivors themselves internalized the myth. For example, @MamaSeLlamma said, “because we were in a serious relationship and I had said yes before”. In addition, survivors who were construed as promiscuous were depicted as being unable to say no as they are seen as constantly open and available for sex. For example, @weisen\_win stated, “I was promiscuous in my youth and thought no one would believe it wasn’t consensual because of my past”. Although an extensive analysis was not conducted due to the small sample size, the findings reveal that posters seemed to internalize the myth and felt that their openness to sexual relations appeared to others to relay

their consent. The posters' bodies spoke for them as it appeared they did not feel they would be listened to because of their actions prior to the assault.

### Conclusion

My data suggests that, even though social media represents a contemporary means to discuss issues surrounding sexual assault and women's equality more broadly, this does not automatically mean the discussion will produce alternative discourses. Dominant constructions surrounding rape myths continue to have an influence on the dialogue surrounding sexual assault in my sample. The findings indicate that myths are still a centerpiece for the way women talk about sexual assault, suggesting that feminist scholars need to do more to help create space for alternative conceptions that are more socially just. In other words, the presence of the myths in the data suggests that social media alone is not enough to shift the discourse because women, as survivors, tend to reproduce it either by internalizing it and blaming ourselves or by accepting it as 'social fact', 'the way it is', or 'I didn't report because cops would blame me because I was drunk'.

Given all of the feminist work on breaking down these myths it is important to note that rape myths continue to be cultural capital for people as they seek to define sexual assault. This seems to indicate that feminists working on creating alternative discourses need to continue to bust these myths as they can still be drawn upon when discussing sexual assault and, as such, they will continue to have an impact on survivors. In particular, the dominant discourses surrounding consent appeared to have continued salience. Gendered notions of consent where with men construing agreement to sex based upon women's actions and behavior prior to the assault (i.e. if they drank, what they wore, if they flirted etc.) may result in a reduction of women's bodily agency to choose what happens to her because of their actions prior to the result.

In this construction, consent is a passive interaction between two parties that enables men to infer consent without any verbal dialogue with women. Many posters clearly articulated how this interpretation of consent was internalized and how this made it difficult for them to talk about the assault or to even consider the behavior they experienced as an assault.

However, the data also suggests that it is important to consider how alternative discourses can repurpose dominant understandings. Dominant constructions embedded in alternative discourses was illustrated in the discussion of rape myth no.1. Posters resisted the myth that men cannot be sexually assaulted and women cannot sexually assault by including discussion of men as survivors. Dominant tropes surrounding sexual assault focus on the survivor's actions and absolve the perpetrator of any blame. Although the discussion of men as survivors continued to revolve around a binary understanding of gender (i.e. men and women), it flipped the issue of who has survivor status. In doing so, survivors, including female survivors, were put at the center of the conversation surrounding sexual assault. This survivor-centrism shifted the traditional focus away from the perpetrator and his expectations, understandings and needs. At the same time, having this alternative conversation revolve around the survivor perpetuated the general effect of the myths that focus on the survivor. The continuing impact of myths is important for ongoing feminist research on sexual assault as dominant tropes may potentially be unintentionally put forward in alternative discussions and the effect of that can be mixed. Posters' resistance to the myths can still be impacted by dominant discourses making it difficult to truly form an alternative.

The main construction that is presented as an alternative conception is the notion of consent. This alternative conception of consent is construed as an active process between two parties. As such, consent cannot be inferred from the male perpetrator's assumptions about a

woman's behavior or actions, but has to be given through a verbal exchange where both parties are equals in the interaction. Thus, one person cannot coerce the other into the verbal affirmation needed for the sexual interaction as using this power to coerce the other is depicted as non-consensual. If the person is unable to verbally articulate her consent, then there is no consent. As such, a freely given, explicit, verbal affirmation is the crux of providing consent.

Feminist activists and scholars have been advocating for affirmative consent for decades and this has been realized in recent case law (for e.g., see *R v. Ewanchuk*). The tweets suggest that this conceptualization has moved beyond feminist scholars and jurists and has begun to become embedded in the way people in general view consent. However, the tweets link the notion of affirmative consent directly to sexual agency, a theme that comes up across a number of resisting constructions.

The posters' construction of bodily agency is important on two fronts; first it asserts that women *have* bodily agency and second it asserts that men must *respect* this agency. This is significant as it is a key component of equality (i.e. the equal right to control one's own body). This shifts the power away from the perpetrator to decide whether the sex will occur to women having the power to choose what happens to their own bodies. It also switches the discussion significantly from whether the woman acted to communicate no to a new discussion of what agential consent looks like. Again, this requires us to examine the perpetrator's actions (Did he ask? Did he confirm? Did he listen? Did he assume?). This is consistent with the feminist literature as it shifts the responsibility for the attack onto the perpetrator. At the same time, the focus on women's agency and power requires us to examine the communication that preceded the attack and not on the 'sexual' nature of the violence itself.

Accordingly, the hashtag shows that online fora can promote alternative discourses (e.g. affirmative consent rooted in women's sexual agency) but it also shows that dominant discourses continue to have salience even on different media and in the presence of alternative discourses. More work is needed in order to see whether these alternative discourses retain traction or if they become swallowed up by the dominant discourse that perpetuate rape myths.

## **Chapter Five- Conclusion:**

The #beenrapedneverreported hashtag was launched by Sue Montgomery and Antonia Zerbisias as a response to the treatment of the women who came forward with allegations of sexual misconduct against CBC radio host Jian Ghomeshi. The hashtag was expressly created as a space for posters to come forward to discuss sexual assault and put in their own words the reasons why they did not come forward to report their assault. #beenrapedneverreported is part of what appears to be a recent trend where women use online media to bring forward women's voices to discuss issues that are important to them. Twitter in particular has been used as a catalyst for conversations such as #yesallwomen, #WhenIWas, #ShePersisted, #NastyWomen and #MeToo. This project was created to test this trend, and in particular to begin to explore the kinds of alternative conversations, if any, women have about sexual assault in these online spaces.

To situate the project, I examined feminist discussions of sexual assault since the 1970s. These discussions largely revolved around rape myths, i.e. persistent but false beliefs about sexual assault, because the reported rate of rapes was so low. Rape myths were identified as reasons why women did not come forward when they were assaulted: given the social assumptions about rape, assaults would be constructed as the fault of the victim who must have done something to "ask for it". Feminists have continually worked to debunk rape myths, especially around social unwillingness to acknowledge that the vast majority of rapes are committed by romantic partners and acquaintances. Social media has been a tool to bring advocacy discussions surrounding sexual assault online with the advent of 'hashtag feminism'.

My data underlines how resilient these myths continue to be. Despite the use of modern media to discuss sexual assault, rape myths have continued to shape many people's approach to

talking about rape, including some survivors. Posts in my data that replicated dominant discourses may provide some evidence that the myths continue to be internalized by victims who both accepted the blame for the assault and/or were stopped from coming forward after the assault because they knew that others would judge them based on these myths and blame them for their victimization. This belief that the assault was the fault of the survivor and not the perpetrator was held by friends and family as well as police. Importantly, the responsibility for the assault was placed on the survivor but her bodily agency as it relates to consent also seemed to be compromised or constrained by the myths. Her actions prior to the assault (i.e. drinking, the way she was dressed, flirting) were construed as her consenting to sexual relations. This suggests that women only retain bodily agency before the assault occurs (because they cannot act in certain ways) but they lose the ability to control what happens to their body both during and after the assault because consent has been implied by others based on actions which are unrelated to actually giving consent. These prior actions then, dictate the future control a woman can over her body. As a result, survivors did not come forward and stayed silent about their assaults because they believed that, based upon their own prior actions, what they experienced did not 'count' as sexual assault.

Importantly, my data suggests that this blame was also placed on survivors by criminal justice personnel and those closest to them. As such, silencing survivors occurs at multiple levels: some survivors self-silence but others are silenced by a variety of individuals. This indicates the broad impact rape myths have on people's understanding of sexual assault and that there is a lot of work to be done to shift away from understanding sexual assault through these myths.

However, my data demonstrates that simply having a space to describe the silence also produced a space for the creation of alternative discourses. For example, many posters explicitly rejected the validity of a number of myths (i.e. victim drank alcohol, victim dressed provocatively, victim flirted) and strongly indicated that that behaviour before the assault does not constitute consent. Consent played a pivotal role in this alternative discourse because sexual assault was constructed as women being denied their agency to choose what happens to their bodies. As such, rape is a serious offence precisely because women lose their agency/autonomy. Many posters argued that women should be able to choose what happens to their bodies and tried to reclaim their bodily agency through participating in a dialogue about the meaning of sexual assault. In particular, posters challenged the assertion that women's actions before the assault constituted consent and instead argued that a woman has to speak consent and this is achieved through a verbal exchange. Importantly, this voice cannot be constrained in any capacity, as only 'yes' means 'yes' and 'no' only means 'no'. From this perspective, rape is not about sex but is instead construed as a denial of women's bodily agency. Many posters also challenged traditional gender dynamics by placing responsibility on men to obtain consent and seeing women as active participants in consensual sexual exchanges.

Importantly, although many posters did create alternative discourses that challenged the myths, some of the attempts to challenge them seemed to repurpose them instead. For example, rape myth no. 1 (men cannot be sexually assaulted and women do not commit sexual assault) resisting posts included men as survivors. The discussion still revolved around women and female survivors, but opening up the category of survivor created a discussion that was survivor centric. However, rather than creating an alternative discourse that focused on the perpetrator, the discussion about male survivors replicated the conversation of sexual assault with regard to

female survivors, giving the male perpetrator a bye. This suggests that even tweets that try to resist dominant conceptualizations of sexual assault are at risk of unknowingly perpetuating rape myths. This is important as understanding the impact myths have on conceptualizations of sexual assault provides an opportunity to view the barriers to considering certain acts sexual assault. Since rape myths continue to persist in discussions surrounding sexual assault, it is important that we continue to consider them when discussing sexual assault.

Moreover, while it has been argued within the literature that social media provides a platform for creating alternative constructions, the literature on social media's impact on feminist online conversations is still in its infancy. My data indicates that the factors that impact conversations offline continue to have influence in the online sphere. Within the current research it was apparent that alternative discourses were couched within the same rape myths that have been discussed for the past 40 years. This suggests that technology and social media may not be the liberating 'game changer' for feminist activism that they are purported to be. It may be a naïve claim to posit that technology and social media are a panacea for combatting sexual assault. While they may be tools to foster discussion I would caution against putting all feminist activism on social media as it is a presumption and not a fact that it will create a healthy public sphere for emancipatory dialogue surrounding sexual assault.

### Limitations

The current research is limited by the operationalization of mainstream and alternative discussions through the presence of rape myths. Accordingly, I coded the tweets based on whether or not they replicated or resisted the rape myths that had been identified in feminist literature. There could have been other ways of looking at the construction of sexual assault on the hashtag (e.g. an inductive method to organize the tweets). However, in order to test whether

or not the hashtag provided a forum for an alternative discussion, I decided that this approach best enabled me to contrast the construction of sexual assault from different perspectives.

Additionally, the coding of the data could have been impacted by my own bias as I have previously worked as a rape crisis counselor and was on a committee for the prevention of sexual violence at the University of Ottawa. These organizations had a particular conception of sexual assault and this could have influenced how I looked at the tweets. This could have lead to confirmation bias, i.e. I may have coded the tweets in a certain way to uphold the previous conceptions that I had (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). To counteract this limitation, I tried to reflect on these experiences and to appreciate how this may influence my approach to the data. I also relied heavily on the feminist literature and drew mainstream myths from previous scholarship rather than from my own experiences or perspective.

A limitation of the qualitative content analysis is that it fails to address “why” research questions (Bryman, 1994). The aim of the current research was not to address why but to examine the claim that hashtag feminism can push back against misogynist constructions of sexual assault. The research question was a “how” research question – how do posters talk about sexual assault? Do they replicate rape myths or challenge them?

Moreover, if any of the posts were deleted before they were collected then they are not included in the analysis. As such, the sample was comprised of the tweets that had not been deleted or reported before I collected them in June, 2016. Twitter allows users to flag posts that they deem to be offensive. As a result, trolling commentary or offensive comments that may have added to this dialogue could have been reported and removed by posters. Additionally, the hashtag went viral and spread throughout the globe. This also meant some posts were uploaded in French, German, Korean, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish. Given the constraints of a Master’s

thesis it was not possible to acquire the resources necessary to translate these tweets. Thus, the perspectives from other countries were restricted and the language used to discuss sexual assault was limited to English.

Since users opt in to whether or not they want to post, the data is dependent on the posters who decided to contribute to the hashtag. Importantly, this project can only draw some conclusions about comments posted on this particular hashtag. However, even though the description may have been limited to a specific hashtag, the description provided adds to the emerging literature on the discussion of sexual assault on social media. Further, it provides a basis for other research in this area. Given the plethora of hashtags on this subject matter, analysis in this area is important to developing an understanding of what can be gathered from this medium.

### Future Research

The current project adds to the qualitative research on sexual assault and in particular explores the impact that sexual assault myths have on discussions surrounding sexual assault. The current research project also adds to our knowledge of the continued salience rape myths have in discussions surrounding sexual assault and the challenges to using social media for feminist activism.

Building on the findings of the current project, future research may be able to paint a more robust picture of the challenges and successes of creating alternative discourses. In particular, qualitative research on feminist activism using social media and/or hashtag feminism would be beneficial given the plethora of hashtags that have come out in the last few years on sexual assault and the dearth of literature on the subject. Moreover, it would be beneficial to

further explicate whether these myths continue to have an impact on discussions of sexual assault. While the current project focused on Twitter and this has commonly been used as a medium for these discussions, it is important to research the differential impact other social media have on these conversations. Given the constraints of the character limit on Twitter, there may be other media that are more conducive to the creation of alternative discourses. However, there has been a dearth of research in this area. More broadly, I believe that it is key to link the research between social media and sexual assault to determine whether hashtags that followed #beenrapedneverreported have been able to shift the general public's understanding and awareness of alternative constructions of rape.

## Appendix A: Rape Myth Coding Grid

Rape Myth	Reportive	Resistive
Men cannot be sexually assaulted and women do not commit sexual assault.	-Women described as victims, men described as perpetrators -e.g. I believe women! Men get consent period.	- Men as victims, gender non-binary victims. -Women as perpetrators -e.g. It's not just women, a man can be a victim to.
Victims lie about being sexually assaulted.	-Reflect that women/victims do not tell the truth -e.g. I tried to tell the police but they ignored me.	-Discuss low rates of false reporting - Discuss victims and truth - e.g. It's not that victims lie. So many more don't report at all.
Sexual assault is committed by a stranger (in a dark alley).	-Reflects belief a known perpetrator cannot sexually assault -e.g. I didn't think it counted because they were my boyfriend.	-Discusses a known perpetrator -e.g. It was my Mom's boyfriend.
Sexual assault is just sex (i.e. it is not violence)	-Discusses sexual assault in terms of sex. -e.g. People thought I was lucky because he was attractive.	-Discusses violence in conjunction with sexual assault. -e.g. He ripped me. I've had nightmares for 15 years.
If the victim drinks alcohol (or takes drugs) then that is consent to sexual relations.	-Discusses alcohol being used as consent. -e.g. Police told me it was my fault for drinking.	-Discusses alcohol's inability to allow consent. -e.g. He told me it didn't count because we were drinking but I know alcohol doesn't mean consent.
When women say no to sex they really mean yes.	-Women's no construed as a yes. -e.g. I tried to say no but he did it anyway.	-Discussion of affirmative consent. -e.g. Ladies let's remember that only yes means yes.
If the victim dresses provocatively that is consent to sexual relations.	-Tweet linking what they were wearing before/during the assault to the sexual assault. -e.g. Figured I'd be blamed for what I was wearing.	-Rejecting the connection between what the victim wears and the sexual assault. -e.g. It doesn't matter what you wore it's not your fault.
Men who are aroused have to have sex.	-Link between men and their 'biological imperative'. -e.g. I tried to fight but he just had to have sex.	- Challenging men's biological need. -Identifying women's needs. -e.g. Men you need to learn to control your sex drive.
If the victim flirts with the person, then they have consented to sexual relations.	-Reflect interest (kissing, going back to their place) in perpetrator before the assault determined as consent. -e.g. I thought it was my fault for going over to his place.	-Reject flirtatious behaviour as consent. -e.g. Kisses don't equal consent.

<p>If you agreed to sex once then you have consented to sex in the future.</p>	<p>-Discusses previous sexual interactions and its impact on assaultive encounter. -e.g. I didn't think I could say no because we had sex before.</p>	<p>-Indicates that sex with multiple partners does not indicate future consent with different partner. -Indicates that sex multiple times with the same person does not equal consent. -e.g. Saying yes once doesn't mean yes every time.</p>
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