

Switching the Code:

The complicity of female Twitter users in the preservation of rape culture

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### ABSTRACT

Rape culture is a reality that many women in the United States must combat on a daily basis, whether it is judgment for the length of their skirt, being cat-called on a street corner, or being blamed for a traumatizing crime that has been committed against them. The presence of social networking sites, such as Twitter, has increased the frequency of rape discourse. This study examines the way in which rape culture is constructed on the social media website Twitter, data is based upon 600 tweets that contain rape discourse. The age, geographic location, and gender of the Twitter user who tweeted these phrases were analyzed. Findings revealed that female users were equally as likely to engage in rape culture discourse as males. The findings suggest that female Twitter users are enabling a code switch in order to be seen as “one of the guys,” and ultimately protect themselves from the possibility of becoming a victim.

In the past forty years there has been a growing academic discussion of rape culture; the term was first introduced in the 1970s by second wave American feminists who sought a term to accurately characterize the discourse in which sexuality and violence are linked. Burt (1980) defines rape culture as words, phrases, or actions that normalize and trivialize sexual assault, rape, and violence towards women.

Although rape culture has been discussed in the United States since the 1970s, measuring the range of diverse opinions regarding the topic has improved with the advancement of social media technology such as Facebook, blogs, and Twitter. While some scholars have written about how such technology can positively contribute to the democratization of discourse, the development of the social networking website Twitter has also made it possible for people of all ages, races, and geographic locations to express what Pavlik (2013) calls a socialized discourse which perpetuates rape culture in one-hundred-forty characters or less. Pavlik (2013) reports that the media coverage of recent court cases such as the rape of a sixteen-year-old in the small town of Steubenville, Ohio (2012) has revealed that young male rapists live tweeted their actions to their numerous Twitter followers and eventually, the rest of the world.

Given media attention to the growing use of Twitter to boast about rapes, the purpose of this study is to examine how registered Twitter users construct rape culture as a normalized discourse. The central research questions addressed here are: what type of Twitter user is constructing rape culture discourse, what primary age group is perpetuating normalized ideas about rape, and do disparities between one's race and ethnicity correlate with frequency of participating in rape discourse. This paper argues that contrary to other forms of social media which display a static form of rape culture (e.g. photographs), the online social networking site Twitter, creates a public platform for the instantaneous construction and reconstruction of rape

culture. In some cases, this construction of rape discourse may be the result of a specific group of Twitter users switching the code and conforming to the misogynistic socialization they have experienced in the surrounding culture since birth.

### **Theory: Discourse Analysis**

Certain controversial topics, such as the concept of Rape Culture, are conceptualized by members of society in a multitude of ways for each person may have a different opinion about the concept based on their own beliefs and experiences. These different opinions are described by theorists as *discourses*, which is a term that refers to “an interrelated system of statements which cohere around common meanings and values that are a product of social factors; of powers and practices” (Gavey, 1989, p. 464).

Discourse Analysis is the practice of analyzing a text for the meanings and implications behind one’s opinion. According to Gavey (1989), this theory is often used by researchers to discuss the different ways in which power and power relations are perpetuated throughout society. One way that societal powers can be made visible, is through the use of specific words and phrases.

*In Feminist Poststructuralism and Discourse Analysis* (1989), Gavey discusses the reconstruction of the meaning of certain words throughout history. Gavey’s specifically discusses how certain words, such as “consent,” can have different meanings, based upon the discourse that exists in society. Gavey described the way in which some women felt uncomfortable with a sexual situation that they had previously experienced, but they did not believe the term “sexually victimized” was accurate because they “consented” to the act. Gavey concludes that the patriarchal powers that perpetuate hypersexualized and violent images in the

media has a direct influence on a person's discourse; women may unknowingly be swayed to believe certain beliefs based on the information that they are receiving in their social environment.

In *Power as Knowledge* (1976) Foucault discussed discourses as a product of power systems that exist in society. According to Lemert (2013), Foucault was specifically interested in the discourses that surround sexuality, and the societal complications behind the establishment of these discourses. Foucault (1976) explains the relationship between power and discourse by discussing how power is solidified through laws and social hegemonies. Foucault acknowledges that the definition of power is often misunderstood, and explains that he is not theorizing about power in terms of systemic institutions that have the means to control a given group of people (e.g. the police). Instead, Foucault describes power as, "the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization" (p.353).

Foucault states that the influence of power is unavoidable, including within texts. He contends that texts must be analyzed to understand the meaning of discourse shaping the text. Discourse Analysis allows researchers to expose the power that is being transmitted from a given textual discourse, and analyze the social forces behind one's stated opinion or action.

Criticism of Foucault's theory exist, particularly regarding his definition of power and how power is expressed within discourse. Feminist theorist, Fraser, in *Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions* (1989), argues that Foucault's view, which states that different forms of subjectivity are related by their structures of power does not leave room for people to oppose the sources of power. Fraser asks, if Foucault believes that people are created by the effects of power, then who has the ability to resist power? By claiming that he has

a neutral stance on the power structures behind a discourse, Fraser believes Foucault is restricting feminists from criticizing patriarchal societal forces and gaining the resources to move toward social change. Despite Fraser's criticism, Foucault's theory remains relevant for it offers an insight into how power relations influence discourse and the way in which a discourse, such as feminism, can be shaped by the social and political forces of one's surroundings.

Feminists have used Discourse Analysis to examine many discourses about sexuality and women's experiences. Gavey (1989) examines the discourse regarding sexual coercion within heterosexual relationships. Paying close attention to existing social context of the language, Gavey analyzed the discourses' relationship to power structures. Gavey discussed how discourse involving normative sexual practices are socially constructed to emphasize masculine power and feminine submissiveness. Gavey claims that rape discourse defines rape as "legitimate heterosexual relationships," meaning a relationships between a man and a woman who have an established repertoire with one another. Gavey argues different discourses exist defining what constitutes rape. Gavey (1989) states, "In some instances, rapes literally 'don't exist' because the victim sees the coercive sexual experience as natural and legitimate in the context of a structured power relationship between a man and a woman" (p. 470). Gavey concludes that if a woman lives in a society in which consent is seen as valid when alcohol is involved, or date rape has become a normalized occurrence (ie, a "rape culture") than she may not equate her personal experiences with that of sexual assault or rape.

One of the most visible ways in which rape culture continues to be perpetuated is through linguistic practices. In *The Rape Culture* (1984) Dianne F. Herman explains how commonly used phrases such as "F--- you" takes a word that is connected to sexuality and links it to a meaning that holds aggression. Herman argues that the phrases that are used on a daily basis are further

influencing the way in which ideas of sexuality and violence, as well as male dominance and female submissiveness, are spread throughout society, based on the discourse of sexual relations that one is exposed to in her/his environment.

Discourse Analysis is a valuable perspective for analyzing texts in order to understand how power systems influence one's opinion. By using this theoretical framework, the discourses that exist surrounding the topic of rape culture on the social media website, Twitter, will become visible. Although Foucault may not have originally theorized about the possibility of social media discourses being analyzed, all forms of texts are to be valuable and worth exploring in order to unearth various discourses of power.

## **Literature Review**

### ***The Link between Sexuality & Violence***

According to feminist scholars, by linking sexuality and violence, a culture of rape has been created. One of the earliest discussions of a rape culture and arguments for how rape is socially constructed through linguistics was Herman's revolutionary book, *The Rape Myth* (1984). Herman argues, that myths, which construct a situation-based legitimacy for rape, continue to spread because of gendered language, which instructs women to be submissive. Additionally, Herman notes the generational socialization regarding the belief that sexual relationships are a male's opportunity to assert masculinity by taking control of women in an aggressive manner.

Herman's work serves as the foundation for other researchers who make the connection between linguistics and rape culture; Kimmel (2013) further elaborates this rape culture by describing other adjectives linking sex and violence that are used to describe women in

American society: “She’s a *bombshell* or a *knockout*; she’s *dressed to kill*, a real *femme fatale*. Women’s beauty is perceived as violent to men” (p.183).

Previous research has also examined how a belief in certain ideas further constructs rape culture. In her piece *Cultural Myths and Supports for Rape* (1980), Burt details the cultural myths surrounding rape. Burt (1980) emphasizes the importance of gender stereotypes in rape culture; “the higher the sex role stereotyping, adversarial sexual beliefs, and acceptance of interpersonal violence, the greater a respondent's acceptance of rape myths” (p. 217). Burt theorizes that the younger and better educated a person is, the less likely it is for she/he to have stereotypical attitudes and belief in rape myths. However, higher education may not be a definite factor when contemplating who will and will not believe rape myths to be accurate.

Saroj Hardit’s (2012) research on masculine-driven peer groups, specifically fraternities, reveals that educated men also believe rape culture myths. Hardit surveyed 177 heterosexual undergraduate men who attended a large university in the Midwest. Hardit notes that existing literature on sexual assault tends to focus on heterosexual relationships. Hardit found that over one-third of the participants admitted that they had suffered from peer group related pressure throughout their time in college, and that participants who were a member of a fraternity had a higher level of sexual aggression towards women when compared to those who did not associate with a distinguished peer group.

### ***Media’s Influence on Youth***

Media can have lasting effects on the way in which people view sexual relations, especially youth. Anderson et al (2003) studied the influence that violence portrayed in the media can have on younger viewers and found that viewing media images of violence increases a person’s likelihood of engaging in aggressive and violent behaviors in both the short term and



long term. The researchers concluded that, “short-term exposure increases the likelihood of physically and verbally aggressive behaviors, thoughts, and emotions” (p. 82). Furthermore, they discussed the increased potential for physical assault and spouse abuse as a result. According to Anderson, et al (2003), media enables a person to have aggressive thoughts and leads to violent actions because media violence increases the already existing aggressive scripts that exist within a person. They argue that seeing images of violent actions increases physiological stimulation and triggers an automatic tendency to imitate what is seen on screen.

The characteristics of the viewer of media violence also impact one’s reaction to a violent or aggressive image. Anderson et al (2003) argue that youths are especially susceptible to aggression shown in the media because their social scripts and moral beliefs are less solidified than their older peers. A viewer’s sex also affects how she/he reacts to viewing media violence. Jones (1999) found that males are often portrayed as more threatening in the media than women; therefore, when males view hostile masculinity on screen, they may find themselves identifying with the characters that are being portrayed. Flood and Pease (2009) found that television advertisements tend to affect heterosexual males on an intimate level, because women’s bodies and particular body parts are often shown in a sexualized manner in order to sell a product. They theorized that these portrayals of female sexuality may increase a male’s acceptance of sexual aggression, because he may be viewing a violent television program while being exposed to sexual advertising during the commercial breaks.

Other studies suggest that socioeconomic class influences one’s reception of media violence. Flood and Pease (2009) found that children from lower socioeconomic classes are often not sheltered from the images of brutality. They report that the average elementary school aged child will have seen approximately eight thousand murders and more than one-hundred thousand

other acts of violence by viewing television, or from witnessing real-life alterations. Anderson et al (2003) note that children of low socioeconomic backgrounds tend to watch more television, because of a lack of parental guidance and availability. This increased amount of television viewing, as well as witnessing violent acts in one's environment, Anderson, et. al (2003) argue, can lead to risk factors for lower class children as they become adults, and may cause them to become violent as they grow older.

### ***Social Media's Presence in Today's Society***

Social factors such as the presence of a rape culture on social media sites combined with various demographic factors including age and class and may have contributed to a sexually demeaning act performed by high school students in Steubenville, Ohio. During the summer of 2012, two football players--who were part of an athletic team known in their town for holding power and prestige--, sexually assaulted and raped an unconscious sixteen year old girl. The young men publicized their crime by live-updating during the assault through multiple pictures, videos, and derogatory statements posted to their social media accounts (Oppel, 2013). Social media has an ubiquitous presence in the lives of people today. Around the world people have the opportunity to make their voices be heard through the pictures that they share, and the words that they write online (Hirst, 2012).

In 2006, the social media website, Twitter, was introduced. The website is described as a, "social networking and microblogging site" (Carlson, 2011). The platform is unique because users can quickly send and read messages of under one hundred and forty characters, called "tweets." Twitter allows users to share their opinions based on their day to day events or their reactions about viral news stories. The website quickly garnered users; in 2012, the website had over 500 million registered users with over 340 million tweets posted daily (Lunden, 2012).

There have been few academic studies on the impact of Twitter to date, likely because of its recent introduction. However, journalists have discussed the power that websites can have when pertaining to social issues, such as the Arab Spring and other political uprisings. Hirst (2012) discusses the positive effect that social media websites had on sparking mass public protest stating, “Technology takes on a life of its own and is seen as a driver of social phenomena, rather than implicating itself in social relation” (p. 4). Hirst (2012) analyzes the social media of present day through Marx’s idea of “fetishism of commodities,” which states that there is a trend in capitalist societies to view social relations “through the prism of things” (p. 6). An online blogger, Pavlik (2013) suggests that social relations are beginning to be seen through different fragments of technology, specifically that of social media.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a content analysis of Twitter messages in order to analyze how Twitter users construct rape culture. Twitter is an online social networking site that allows users to post updates of their day to day to lives in messages of one-hundred-and-forty words or less, called “tweets” (Carlson, 2011). A Twitter user’s online profile page’s layout consists of a cover photograph, an image of the Twitter user, and a brief description or quote about the specific user, their age, and their location. The center of the profile page contains updates of both written tweets and pictures that the user has posted. The profile page also contains the cumulative number of tweets the user has posted, and the number of Twitter “followers.” Twitter followers refer to the number of other Twitter users who subscribe to a specific person’s Twitter updates. Twitter has over 500 million registered users and has become one of the most prominent social media websites on the internet to discuss popular culture (Carlson, 2011). Thousands of tweets are produced every minute; therefore, the data is virtually infinite.

The data collected for this study includes information contained on the user profile page combined with the messages of tweets. The data was collected on October 27 thru November 10, 2014 during the hours of 10 pm to 12 pm EST. This time period was purposefully selected as evening hours may be more likely to contain tweets about rape culture. In total, 150 tweets were collected for four specific phrases, resulting in a total sample of 600 tweets.

The Twitter website has an “Advanced Search” option in which a non-registered member can search for specific content in Tweets, including specific words, phrases, people, places, and dates. Data for this study was obtained by using the advanced search function for phrases that pertain to rape culture, including the phrases “raped me” “no means yes” “you can’t rape the willing” and “asking for it.” Only tweets from persons living in the United States were included. Lastly, any tweets that appeared in the search but were criticizing rape culture were omitted since this study is specifically interested in Twitter users who are trivializing and/or normalizing rape. Tweets that contained the same phrases were categorized together.

### **Findings**

The data from this study shows that overall, women are equally as likely to engage in rape culture discourses as men. Furthermore, Twitter users observed in this research reflect the demographic of the United States population, as whites consist of the largest racial group recorded, followed by blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Middle Easterners.

Twitter Phrase		White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Middle Eastern	TOTAL
you can't rape the willing	Female	56	14	7	1	1	79 (13%)
	Male	42	19	10	0	0	71 (12%)
no means yes	Female	35	10	5	1	2	53 (9%)
	Male	66	14	13	3	1	97 (16%)
asking for it	Female	43	21	2	1	0	67 (11%)
	Male	44	23	12	3	1	83 (14%)
raped me	Female	60	17	3	3	0	83 (14%)
	Male	47	12	4	2	2	67 (11%)
TOTAL		393 (66%)	130 (22%)	56 (9%)	14 (2%)	7 (1%)	600 (100%)

As Table 1 shows, there are no significant differences in the use of Twitter phrases pertaining to rape culture by sex. Females regardless of race are more likely to use the phrases “you can’t rape the willing” (13%) when compared to men (12%) and “raped me” (14% of females versus 11% of males). Males are more likely than women to use the two phrases “no means yes” (16% males versus 9% females) and “asking for it” (14% males versus 11% females). Disparities among racial groups are also present; whites are three times (66%) more likely to use terms that normalize rape compared to blacks (22%). However, this may be due to a larger white Twitter user base.

Examples of tweets from white female users who used the phrase “you can’t rape the willing” included statements such as, “when my girls get drunk they turn into horny freaks... But you can't rape the willing,” “if i ever got @dylanobrien alone in a room i would be arrested for

rape. or not, he could like it. you can't rape the willing," and "you can't rape the willing.. If he blows some smoke, I'm sure she'll be ready to go!" Male tweets were similar in nature, and included statements such as "#PlacesPeopleGetRaped: My bedroom or car don't count since you can't rape the willing or those who are not breathing" and "Fact of the day children: You can't rape the willing."

Twitter Phrase		18-24	25-29	Below 18	30-34	35 and above	TOTAL
you can't rape the willing	Female	51	19	7	1	1	79 (13%)
	Male	38	22	2	5	4	71 (12%)
no means yes	Female	41	4	8	0	0	53 (9%)
	Male	70	14	12	1	0	97 (16%)
asking for it	Female	48	4	15	0	0	67 (11%)
	Male	48	20	12	1	2	83 (14%)
raped me	Female	58	5	20	0	0	83 (14%)
	Male	44	9	14	0	0	67 (11%)
TOTAL		398 (66%)	97 (16%)	90 (15%)	8 (2%)	7 (1%)	600 (100%)

Table 2 compares the sex and age of Twitter users who posted phrases that pertained to rape culture. Those between 18 and 24-years-old (66%) are the most likely ages of users in this study. Twitter users 35 years and above are least likely to construct rape culture through their Tweets (1%). Once again, this may be a reflection of the general participation rate of Twitter users, as the majority of Twitter profiles are constructed by people under thirty-years-old. Notably, the phrase "you can't rape the willing was significantly more likely to be used by

females in the 18-24 age range when compared to males of the same age range (51 times by women versus 38 times by men). The phrase “asking for it” however, is tweeted at the same frequency (48 times) by females and male users in the 18-24 age range. Perhaps, the most notable difference occurs in the 25-29 age category where 20 men versus only four women used the phrase “asking for it.”

The term “raped me” is posted on Twitter at a higher rate by females (14%) than males (11%). Tweets that contained this phrase are frequently discussing academic related work, such as a test that just occurred. Tweets from female users who used the phrase “raped me” included statements such as: “I’m reporting that exam to campus police for sexual assault because it raped me” “Imagine this, the exam I just took was a large black angry man who just brutally raped me in the ass” and “That chemistry test raped me, I feel so violated.”

Twitter Phrase		South	West	Northeast	Midwest	N/A*	TOTAL
you can't rape the willing	Female	13	17	8	6	36	80 (13%)
	Male	21	13	9	7	20	70 (12%)
no means yes	Female	9	3	6	4	31	53 (9%)
	Male	22	13	11	10	41	97 (16%)
asking for it	Female	15	2	8	7	35	67 (11%)
	Male	18	10	10	16	29	83 (14%)
raped me	Female	14	3	9	12	45	83 (14%)
	Male	9	10	13	10	25	67 (11%)
TOTAL		121 (20%)	71 (12%)	74 (12%)	72 (12%)	262 (44%)	600 (100%)
*N/A refers to Twitter users who were from the U.S., but did not specify which state							

Table 3 compares the sex and geographic location of Twitter users who contributed to the construction of rape culture. The South contains the highest number of Tweets (20%) in which these phrases are used. The West, Northeast, and Midwest all contain the same amount of tweets (12%). Forty-four percent of Twitter users did not specify which state they are from on their profile. Southern males used the phrases “no means yes” and “you can’t rape the willing” more frequently than males from other geographic regions.

Tweets from male southerners who used the phrase, “no means yes” included statements such as: “no means yes, and yes means anal” and “half the time a girls 'no' means 'yes'.” Southern females posted similar tweets, including “@bangeemily Anal is abstinence. No means yes, yes means anal,” and “@CallofDuty u guys bent me over and raped me no lube. Bought this game and can’t even log in. Waited til midnight 4 nothing thanks COD.”

The data suggests that one’s sex does not matter when constructing rape discourse. Females in their late teens and early twenties are just as likely as their male counterparts to post tweets in which they normalize rape. Similarly, race and geographic location did not significantly differ when comparing which twitter users are contributing to rape culture. Age, location, and gender did not change the likelihood of Twitter users posting tweets that trivialized and blamed victims for rape.

## **Discussion**

As the data suggests, females ages 18-24 are contributing to rape culture as frequently as males of the same age. There is some variation by race and geographic location, as white southerners contribute to rape culture more frequently than Twitter users of different racial groups or locations. This may be reflective of traditional values and beliefs that are practiced by



individuals in this region. However, overall, females of any race are just as likely as males to espouse rape culture on Twitter, and thus contribute to their own oppression.

This occurrence of self-serving oppression is theorized by Patricia Leavy (2013) as a response by some women to blame the victims of rape, a result of the socialization process to which they have been exposed. According to Leavy (2013) women are socialized from a young age to believe in misogynistic discourse about rape, and to put blame on the victims of sexual crimes. An example of this can be seen in the Steubenville rape case. Although many people came to the defense of the sixteen-year-old girl who was forced to commit sexual acts by her male classmates, some media sites framed the rape as resulting from the victim's actions. News outlets, such as Fox News and CNN noted that the victim had been heavily drinking the night of the attack and voluntarily went to a party where she knew football players would be present. Thus, such media statements contributed to the continuation of a rape discourse which fundamentally accuses rape victims of causing the crime committed against them. Women are contributing to the misogynistic discourse that they have been socialized to believe, presupposing that if they adopt masculine attitudes about rape then they will be viewed as equal to their male peers and perhaps, are then less likely to be a victim of rape themselves.

The fear of being disliked by male peers may influence the statements made by adolescent females on Twitter as they seek to solidify their male peers' approval by endorsing discourses on rape, especially for 18-24-years-old. This is a transitional stage of life during which many women are trying to find out who they are and where they fit into society. Having the approval of men, therefore becomes imperative for heterosexual women who may believe they need male approval in order to succeed and be seen as a desirable partner. Thus, men are a contributing factor in terms of why women are constructing rape culture, for men are the

commodity many heterosexual women are competing for. Accordingly, women are making the decision to pit themselves against other women in order to gain the attention of males, and they are engaging in damaging discourses about rape that are common among their male classmates.

Another potential reason women may be engaging in rape discourse is that by consciously constructing rape culture through the use of their social media accounts, women are practicing a code switch. Sociologist Nikki Jones discusses this phenomenon in *Between Good and Ghetto* (2010). Jones' research focuses on African American girls living in an inner-city neighborhood who change their actions and behaviors depending on the environment in which they inhabit; their actions at home differs from their actions on the streets. Jones concludes that "girls are able to challenge and manipulate the constraining social and cultural expectations embedded in gender and the code, depending on the situation" (p. 235). These girls engage in aggressive and violent behavior on the street, for this behavior is a key to their survival.

Similar to the code switch that takes place for African American girls in urban street culture, the women of Twitter may be perpetuating rape discourses as a mechanism of protection. Young women on Twitter may believe that if they become proponents of rape culture discourse, then they are immune to being raped since they are just like "one of the guys." They are unconsciously masking their vulnerability by performing a code switch through the statements they post on their Twitter accounts.

This code switch allows female Twitter users to draw upon rape discourses in casual conversation, as when the term "raped me" was used to describe a challenging exam, or a costly bill. When an eighteen-year-old Twitter user stated "College algebra test just raped me and made me like it" she is using the term in everyday conversation, thus normalizing the concept of rape and desensitizing herself to the reality of what rape constitutes. She may no longer consider

herself vulnerable to the devastating reality of rape, because she has created a new discourse for the term. Furthermore, she is creating animosity between herself and women who do not practice the code switch. Women often blame other women for their own misfortune, by using statements such as *it was her fault, she brought it upon herself, and she wasn't prepared*. Because of the trivializing attitude that the code switch requires and the hybrid definitions that are created to define rape and sexual assault, some women may believe that if they enable this code switch then they are not weak and that those who do not participate in this code switching are.

Twitter is a social media platform that allows users to instantaneously contribute to the construction of rape culture. Although the focus thus far has been about the women of Twitter, it is important to note, that males are also posting statements that support victim blaming and the normalization of rape. Males are just as likely to post statements in which they state that a test has “raped them” or a woman who is wearing revealing clothing is “asking for it.” Rape culture is a complex social reality, thus blame cannot be attributed to any one social or cultural factor. The eradication of discourses that blame victims for crimes enacted upon them, the desensitization of a physically and emotionally traumatizing event, is not exclusively the fight of either men or women. The blame for the continuation of rape culture should not be placed solely on one sex, for as this research indicates, abolishing rape culture must be an equal endeavor.

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