# "After years of counseling, I stopped stabbing men:"
# The Use of Feminist Humor on Twitter to Dismantle Rape Culture

*Sharon Lauricella, Ann Pegoraro, and Hannah M. Scott*

*In October 2017, author and activist Kate Harding posted a satirical tweet "apologizing" for her history of stabbing men at her previous workplace. The tweet drew attention to the "apologies" offered by men accused of sexual assault, many of which have been issued via social media. This paper is an analysis of a sample (N=489) of tweets made in reply to Harding. Results indicate that the subversive humour in Harding's tweet and replies made in the thread affirm rather than denigrate women and offer both men and women the opportunity to understand more clearly the injustice experienced by women who are victims of sexual assault. Overarching themes in rape culture are reflected in the data, together with more nuanced and specific rape myths. Tweets made in reply to Harding highlight injustices associated with the hierarchy inherent in the gender binary, and the absence of transgender and nonbinary people in the tweets is noted.*

"I'm deeply sorry."

*But…*

"It was a different time."

"Everyone is doing it."

"She really didn't mind."

"It was just a joke."

## Introduction

Research on sexual harassment shows that apologies increase one's perception of the credibility, likability, dedication, and competence of the accused (Dunn and Cody 2000). By contrast, excuses, or attempts to reduce personal responsibility, are generally not helpful in reducing perceptions in cases of either sexual or racial harassment (Hunter and McClelland 1991; McClelland and Hunter 1992). In the wake of sexual assault allegations associated with Harvey Weinstein, new and very public allegations have been made against powerful men in a variety of industries. Yet, many of these men's public "apologies" are hollow, impersonal, disingenuous, and/or come across as excuses. Such statements continue to put the onus of offense and perception of an "uncomfortable environment" on the victim. Examples of such recent

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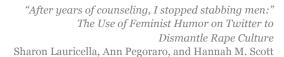Sharon Lauricella, Ann Pegoraro, and Hannah M. Scott

"apologies" include, "I am sorry for the feelings he [Anthony Rapp] describes having carried with him all these years" (Kevin Spacey), "Although it was never my intention, I now understand that the impact of my actions… created an uncomfortable environment" (Chris Sovino), and "… on occasion he has patted women's rears in what he intended to be a good-natured manner… To anyone he has offended, President Bush apologizes most sincerely" (George H. W. Bush). Could it be that apologies are issued like requisite paperwork, are actually thinly cloaked excuses, or that apologies are simply not enough in cases of sexual assault and harassment? In a satirical tweet, author and activist Kate Harding implied all three:



Figure 1. Kate Harding Tweet, 28 October 2017.

On 28 October 2017, Harding[1] posted a satirical tweet which read, "I am sorry for all the times I stabbed men, just a little, in my previous workplace. After years of counseling, I stopped stabbing men" (Figure 1). Harding followed up with a reply, illustrating a weak excuse and apology, with the all-too-familiar tagline that she would be "spending time with my family." The tweet is parodic of the many cloaked excuses-turned-apologies from men accused of sexual assault, many of which have been issued via social media. Harding's tweet generated lively responses from women who satirically and cleverly highlighted the weakness of men's excuses, explanations, and empty apologies. The gender role-reversal in this social media exchange indicates the absurdity of gender-based inequities and cultural norms. This feminist humor addresses how "the bizarre value systems that have been regarded as 'normal' for so long that it is difficult to see how ridiculous they really are" (Barreca 1991, 185) and exposes "gendered power structures" (Shifman and Lemish 2010, 873). This paper is a rigorous qualitative analysis of tweets made in reply to Harding and identifies how feminist humour identifies gender stereotypes, value systems, power structures, and communicative strategies relevant to sexual harassment and assault. A particular focus is on the attempted dismantling of rape culture and patriarchal rape myths in tweets comprising the dataset.

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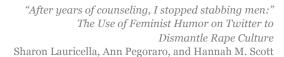Sharon Lauricella, Ann Pegoraro, and Hannah M. Scott

### Rape Culture and Sexual Assault

Harding's work on rape culture (2015) informed the construction of her tweet; her academic and professional work supports feminist literature (e.g., Mahony 1983, 1985, 1989; Lees 1986) that sexual harassment is not about sex—it is about power (Harding 2015, 12). Rape culture is defined as an environment that supports beliefs conducive to rape and increases risk factors related to sexual violence (Sanday 2007). Emilie Buchwald, Pamela Fletcher, and Martha Roth (2005) define rape culture as "a complex of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and supports violence against women [and girls and people of other genders], a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent, and a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women and presents it as the norm" (xi). Rape culture is thus a social creation in which sexual violence is normalized, and in which victims are, as a consequence, considered personally responsible for their assaults (Zaleski, Gundersen, Estupinian, and Vergara 2016). Diane Herman (1984) argues that rape culture is perpetuated when our culture is socialized to expect sexual aggression from people who are cisgender men. Thus, aggressive male behaviour and dominance becomes "normal," resulting in an imbalanced male-female dynamic, at very least in heteronormative context. Recent studies have shown that discussions surrounding violence against women include language and rhetoric of justification (Nagar 2016; Weiss 2009). A study at the University of California considered attitudes toward rape and victims in online social media forums; the study revealed that 25.8% of comments regarding rape, sexual assault, and victims of these crimes blamed the victim and questioned consent (Zaleski, Gundersen, Estupinian, and Vergara 2016).

### Rape Myths

Rape culture is perpetuated by the cultural belief in rape myths. Originally operationalized by Martha Burt (1980, 1991) and subsequently reconceptualised by Kimberly Lonsway and Louise Fitzgerald (1994, 1995), rape myths are stereotyped beliefs about sexual assault and its victims. The beliefs are generally false, yet in Western culture, almost pervasively held as truth. While the broad function of rape myths is to justify male sexual aggression against women, both cisgender and transgender (Payne, Lonsway, and Fitzgerald 1999), such myths also comprise a larger collection of dominant discourses about women, men, and sexuality, which when working together, can obscure recognition of rape and sexual assault (Gavey 1999).

Four of the most common myths about rape, as originally outlined by Burt (1991) and referenced in more recent studies (i.e., Ash, Sanderson, Kumanyika, and Gramlich 2017, 67; Carmody and Washington 2001; Cowan 2000; Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994, 1995; Payne, Lonsway, and Fitzgerald 1999; Weiss 2009, 812), are that (1) nothing happened / women lie about rape to cover up infidelity; (2) no harm was done / the idea that forced sex by intimate partners is not really rape; (3) women secretly want to be forced upon and can prevent it if they really want to; and (4) women who get raped somehow deserve it. Weiss (2009) found that in a study of victims' accounts of sexual assault, many of the same rape myths and gender-based ideologies used by accused rapists were also used by victims in order to deny offender responsibility and minimize the severity of unwanted sexual situations (828). That is, cultural myths associated with "blaming the victim" are also embodied by victims themselves, and such

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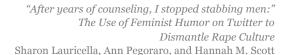Sharon Lauricella, Ann Pegoraro, and Hannah M. Scott

victims cite this information in order to (consciously or not) absolve the offender. Weiss makes clear that the perpetuation of rape myths, particularly by victims, in which victims of "rape and sexual assault use gendered accounts that invoke ideas of sexual victimization as natural, normal, or the victim's own fault" (Weiss 2009, 830) creates an unintentional contribution to the notion that nothing can or should be done about rape and rape culture.

While much feminist literature of the 1980s focused primarily on identifying and understanding male power, it took a gendered approach which identified men's power over women. More recent work on rape culture points to nuances in the social construct of masculinity and how they play into a culture that is permissive of rape. Kerry Robinson's (2005) study of sexual harassment in Australian secondary schools highlights how sexual harassment is "significantly about male power within male groups" (20), and that the performance of hegemonic masculinity can create and solidify gendered cultural bonds between boys and men. This contemporary work shows that the normalization of sexual harassment not only begins early and in earnest, but is also tied to a sense of identity for boys and men.

### Gender Binary

An issue integral to the perpetuation and eventual dismantling of rape culture is the cultural understanding that gender is an oppositional binary: when men and women are pitted against one another as opposites, the result is a cultural hierarchy. Establishment of a place at the top of the cultural hierarchy is desirable, and men and women must compete for pride of place; to date, patriarchy has facilitated that the top of the hierarchy has been the domain of men. It thus follows that if gender is understood as binary, it automatically creates an opposition in sexual assault: women are framed as inherently seductive, and men as unable to resist seduction (Mendes 2015; Herman 1984). This opposition, rooted in biological essentialism, results in assumptions that women want to be chased and that men can (and should) ignore protests. "Seduction" of males can be perceived as a variety of signals, including when women stay out late at night, drink alcohol, flirt with men, wear provocative clothing, or are simply sexually active (Mendes 2015; Bonnes 2013). This cultural understanding is integral to rape culture, for believing that women are being disingenuous about sexual desires and are responsible for men's sexual behaviour "encourages and justifies forced sex" (Abbey, McAuslan, and Ross 1998). Further, the gender binary is injurious to nonbinary people. A nonbinary person read as feminine will experience similar misogynistic treatment. A nonbinary person misread as a cisgender man is likely to face a variety of phobias such as femmephobia, homophobia, and/or transphobia. Thus, nonbinary people are also subject to the myriad problems caused by the gender binary, including misogyny, phobias, and violence.

Given that sexism requires rigid boundaries between men and women, a patriarchal culture does not permit the wide range of behaviour and ability within and across categories. Bem (1993) addresses how a strict dichotomy works against the best interests of women by demonstrating how women have traditionally been denied their rights in contexts of biological essentialism. This denial extends into the realm of sexual (mis)conduct, including sexual assault and harassment. Importantly, a gender binary is not the only cause for sexual misconduct. Sherronda Brown (2022) outlines how compulsory sexuality—the notion that everyone wants sex and that we all have to have it—is tied together with our ideas about capitalism, race, gender, and queerness. All such contemporary issues contribute to women being framed and understood as inherently seductive and sexual.

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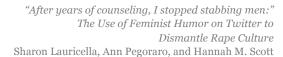Sharon Lauricella, Ann Pegoraro, and Hannah M. Scott

Rape culture becomes even more nuanced when considering the theory of internalized misogyny, which posits that women feel powerless as a result of sexist cultural structures and practices. This powerlessness is expressed as incompetence, such as language that causes the speaker to appear modest, timid, or agreeable (Bearman et al 2009; Thompson 2017). Internalized misogyny results in victim blaming and acceptance of traditional gender roles, and even the denial of sexist events experienced by other women (Knapp 2018). Kate Manne (2018) coined the term "himpathy," and explains that others are apt to feel sympathy for men, excuse male violence, and support patriarchal norms by supporting male perpetrators. This sympathy for men occurs because cultural constructs reward women who "behave" in accordance with patriarchal expectations and rewards them; women who do not comply with patriarchy are punished and /or suffer by being controlled.

Even further, because patriarchy thrives on the male-female binary, it struggles to cohere when heteronormative gender norms are not presented and upheld. Therefore, perpetrators are also likely to victimize transgender people, for the systemic sexist and racist systems seek to silence and erase them (Bettcher 2007). It is therefore clear that anyone violating the prescribed gender norms that patriarchy prescribes—whether it is by gender presentation or behaviour —will face the consequences. Such is the plight of anyone daring to step outside of the heteronormative binary as dictated by patriarchal norms.

## Media Channels

Given the proliferation of new media channels (such as social, news, and networking media), both the presence and challenge of sexism has been brought online. Technofeminist theory recognizes both the positive and negative possibilities available in online spaces. Social media forums have "emancipatory potential" (Powell 2015) whereby women can escape organized gender roles. However, online spaces also have the potential to function as patriarchal tools (Cockburn 1992); media channels can extend the harm of sexual violence via harassment, humiliation, shame, and victim blaming (Powell 2015). Technological advancements, such as media channels, can be utilized to challenge rape culture, though there must be a cultural understanding to make an objection to the eroticism of male domination and female subordination (Herman 1984). Communication technologies and social media have clearly opened discussion and discourse around victims and rape culture. Indeed, social media users have learned about rape culture subsequent to feminists resurrecting the term in online communities (Keller, Mendes, and Ringrose 2016). The potential for social media to both educate and unite activists is perhaps best illustrated by Sarah Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles's (2020) work which highlights the ability of activists in significant social movements to mobilize via Twitter. Bailey has given particular attention to such galvanization via digital communities in the Black community (2021). Social media and communication technologies can, therefore, be conceived as helpful "in mediating informal justice for rape" (Powell 2015).
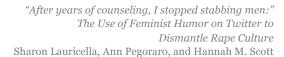
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### Feminist Humor

Given the hundreds of responses to Harding's satirical tweet (details below), an understanding of the purpose and function of humour (and in particular, feminist humour) is helpful in framing the results of this study. In its function as a symbolic gesture, humour affirms, reinforces, and/or challenges concepts and beliefs within society; because humour is, for the most part, expressed in the public sphere, it is an especially poignant act or ritual (Case and Lippard 2009, 242). McGhee (1979), for example, noted that one popular definition of "sense of humour" emphasizes the individual's ability to laugh at shortcomings, to see the light side of things, or to laugh at one's own expense. In this respect, according to Judith Stillion and Hedy White (1976), women appear to have a better sense of humour than men (206); this runs contrary to the adage that women need to "lighten up" because they "can't take a joke."

Given that comedic texts draw on prevalent ideologies, stereotypes, and cultural codes (Shifman and Lemish 2010), the construct and content of humour can identify, celebrate, or mock one's place in contemporary culture. Analyses of humour, therefore, offer a unique perspective for understanding perceptions and stereotypes of highly charged issues such as gender and sexuality (Billig 2005; Boskin 1997). Most everyone can recall a "dumb blonde" joke or the oft-cited quip about men being unable to ask for directions. Divisive humour includes quips such as "I hate it when people say women should stay in the kitchen. How will they clean the rest of the house?" or "For men who say a woman's place in the kitchen, just remember that's where we keep the knives." Such humour is divisive and, again, pits men and women as binary opposites. The opposition resulting from divisive jokes can be problematic because, while the short-term objective is fun and can permit women a sense of solidarity and mutual understanding, in the long-term, such divisive jokes serve a primary purpose of emphasizing the differences between males and females. Divisive jokes have the potential to reinforce assumptions about males and females as both essentially and categorically different (Bing 2004, 27) and reinforce the gender binary.

By contrast, humour can also be subversive, and can effectively challenge the status quo. Jokes or humorous lines can be incorporated into everyday communication in ways that permit conversation which would otherwise be out of bounds. For example, Tracey Ullman's BBC sketch entitled, "What were you wearing?" (Ullman 2017) used gender role-reversal and humour to demonstrate the absurd questions that women are asked when they report sexual assault. In the sketch, Ullman (playing the role of a police investigator) asks a male robbery victim what he was wearing when he was robbed, and accuses him of appearing "provocatively wealthy." This subversive humour does not assume that most men have an objective to oppress women and does not suppose them to be aggressive, rude, or overly-sexualized. Rather, this subversive humour rests on the premise that if perpetrators understood the plight of victims, they would "change their attitudes" (Bing 2004, 28). Similarly, such subversive humour can be considered "coping humour" (Hay 2000, 726), whereby fantasy alternatives are presented in response to difficult and oppressive situations that women endure. Such fantasies offer temporary relief and a sense of camaraderie in that others (presumably exclusively women) share their challenges. In their study of 1700 jokes that are critical of men, patriarchy, and assumptions of male supremacy, Case and Lippard (2009) found that these jokes indicate that women and feminists are using humour as a way to build awareness, challenge male domination and patriarchal social organization, and as an expression of the desire to change the status of women. Similarly, Lisa Merrill (1998) suggests that feminist humour "affirms women's experience, rather than denigrating it" (275). Gloria Kaufman (1980) identifies female humour

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as either anti-male or self-deprecating, while Nancy Walker (1988) goes further to describe self-deprecating female humour as a woman poking fun at herself yet not alienating males or making aggressive comments or jabs.

A potential pitfall, however, of subversive humour is that it does not always provide alternatives to the cultural problems identified in the joke. Despite the temporary relief of coping humour, such humour does not offer any tangible alternatives to the status quo. Indeed, Rose Laub Coser (1960) found that humour which sought to challenge the status quo ultimately perpetuated existing power structures in professional settings. In other words, feminist humour, while affirming the shared experience of women, runs the risk of doing little to challenge gender norms and may actually reinforce gender differences and stereotypes. Stillion and White (1987) suggest that the mainstream public, including both men and women, may see feminist jokes as demeaning for men and categorize them as "male-bashing." More recent studies have identified online feminist humour in the form of humourous websites hosted on Tumblr (Ringrose and Lawrence 2018) whereby online misandry memes "present new... tools for women to use online to express their anger and frustration at male dominance" (Lawrence and Ringrose 2018, 225); examples include the fantasy that manspreading (when a man occupies more than a single seat by spreading his legs or arms) is simply a method for making room for cats (see www.savingroomforcats.com).

Overall, it is clear that feminist humour serves an essential function in that it identifies the frustration, exasperation, and sometimes rage, that women experience when confronting issues such as victim blaming and rape culture. The internet—and social media in particular—is an important venue in which participatory culture (Jenkins 2006) permits producers and distributors of humour to express frustration and advice. For example, Carrie Rentschler (2015) considered the hashtag activism of #safetytipsforladies, which satirically identified "safety tips" for women to avoid rape, such as "leave your vagina at home when you go out," or to "stop being a woman in public." Such feminist hashtag humour "asserts the value of hijacking spaces of discussion and commentary online, articulating feminist critique in ways that also, importantly, make us laugh" (Rentschler 2015, 355).

## Problem Statement and Research Question

Rentschler's (2015) identification of the value of feminist humour, particularly via the public space in social media, is a meaningful anecdotal commentary and lends legitimacy to identifying the dearth of research in this area. Yet there has been no systematic study of feminist humour via social media, and no scholarly analysis of feminist humour via Twitter. This project is the first rigorous qualitative analysis in response to this gap in literature and seeks to identify the unique placement of feminist humour in the social media forum. To that end, the following research question is posed:

> RQ: How did Twitter users use feminist humour to address gender stereotypes, value and power structures, and communication regarding sexual harassment and assault?

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## Method

### Data Collection

To gather the responses to Kate Harding's tweet, the chrome browser extension Treeverse was utilized. Treeverse, developed by Paul Butler and available on GitHub (Butler 2017) allows for the collection and examination of escalating Twitter conversations. Conversations are visualized as a tree with each node representing an individual tweet, and an edge or line between two tweets indicating the temporal arrangement of replies (with lower nodes being replies to upper ones). In addition, the colour of the line indicates the time duration between the two tweets (e.g., red indicates a reply in 5 minutes of the previous tweet and blue indicates a reply received over 3 hours from the previous tweet) (Butler 2017). At the writing of this article, Kate Harding's tweet had garnered 28,799 Retweets, 89,824 Likes, and 4,630 replies. The replies to the tweet were collected October 30, 2017, within 48 hours of the time she tweeted on October 28 so as to collect rapid dialogue and the most timely responses. Treeverse returned a total of 489 replies from 312 unique Twitter users, providing a sample reply tree of just over 10% of the total replies (Figure 2). At the time of data collection, The Vanguard Group was the largest stakeholder in Twitter. Users were not subject to any limitations on how many tweets that they could see or interact with, thus this large amount of data collection was possible. Since 2023, and Elon Musk's takeover and subsequent rebrand of the platform, Twitter (rebranded to X) would not permit such data collection now that limitations on the number of tweets visible to users each day have been introduced.



Figure 2. Treeverse of Replies to Kate Harding's Tweet

### Qualitative Data Analysis

In keeping with rigorous qualitative data analysis methods, the practice of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006) guided this research process. The grounded theory method applies both inductive and deductive processes. The first step of initial coding observes and identifies the "what" of data (Charmaz 2006, 47; Glaser 1978, 57). In this case, it included an open observation of each tweet collected in response to Harding's tweet. This initial reading

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of the data provides a thick and rich description (Geertz 1973). The process of axial coding follows next in the research process; this stage involves sorting, synthesizing, and organization of large amounts of data and reassembling them in new, meaningful ways (Creswell 1998). The axial phase included identifying themes and categories evident in the tweets. Finally, theoretical coding "weaves the… story back together" (Glaser 1978, 72; Charmaz 2006, 63). This final stage in the data analysis process identifies potential relationships between categories and generates theory, for the practice of close readings and constant comparison of content provides a coherent, integrated story of the data. The theoretical, deductive phase in the analysis includes working from a newly constructed broad/general theory or conclusion and confirming or disproving it (Trochim 2002). In the process of qualitative data coding and analysis, tweets were coded independently and discussed until inter-rater reliability reached 100%.
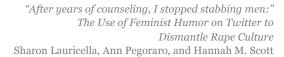
## Results

In order to identify how feminist humour addresses gender stereotypes, value and power structures, and communication regarding sexual harassment and assault, a qualitative analysis of 489 tweets responding to Kate Harding's original tweet was conducted. The analysis yielded 8 themes: (1) biological essentialism 5%, n=22, (2) liability/responsibility 23%, n=113 (3) punishment 1%, n=3, (4) nothing happened/denial 4%, n=20, (5) consent 9%, n=46, (6) culture/normalization/no harm was done 30%, n=147, (7) the work of God 3%, n=17, and (8) support for the thread 12%, n=61. Three other categories, including (9) objection to the thread 4%, n=19, (10) not understanding the thread 1%, n=4, and (11) irrelevant 8%, n=37, were also evident but not relevant to the analysis and deconstruction of feminist humour as related to Harding's tweet. Figure 3 represents the frequency of each theme.

| Category | Percent in Tweets from Users | Number of Tweets from Users |
|---|---|---|
| Culture/Normalization/No Harm Was Done | 30 | 147 |
| Liability/Responsibility | 23 | 113 |
| Support for the Thread | 12 | 61 |
| Consent | 9 | 46 |
| Irrelevant | 8 | 37 |
| Biological Essentialism | 5 | 22 |
| Nothing Happened/Denial | 4 | 20 |
| Objection to the Thread | 4 | 19 |
| The Work of God | 3 | 17 |
| Not Understanding the Thread | 1 | 4 |
| Punitive | 1 | 3 |

Figure 3. Percentage of themes in replies to Kate Harding's tweet.

The most prominent themes in the data—discourse about the liability and responsibility of women as well as the normalization of the "no harm done" culture—focus on Western cultural implications regarding the normalization of rape culture and victim blaming, such as "asking for it." Tweets in the "culture/normalization/no harm was done" frame refer to popular culture artifacts or mainstream news stories regarding sexual assault. For example, tweets in this frame mentioned Brock Turner (a university student whose rape of an

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unconscious woman behind a dumpster was a high-profile news event), or President Donald Trump's notorious "locker room talk" comment from 2016. The "liability/responsibility" theme is apparent in 23% of tweets (n=113); these tweets include messages about the "suggestive" clothing of women and how women put themselves at risk of rape by dressing in provocative ways. These themes, comprising over half of the tweets in the dataset, dominate the humorous conversation in response to Harding's tweet.
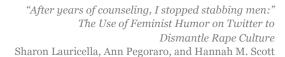
Additional themes, such as consent, nothing happened/denial, the work of God, and biological essentialism are also present and represent additional ways in which feminist humour critiques the patriarchy, such as disputing the idea that "boys will be boys." Tweets that support, object, or do not understand the thread cumulatively take up 17% of the tweets, as expected due to the communal and inclusive nature of Twitter, where all opinions can be posted. These tweets often include emojis that represent the users' emotions (i.e., laughing) or making comments such as "You made my day." Also due to Twitter's nature, a small number of tweets (8%) have been deemed "irrelevant" (8%). These tweets include conversation between Twitter users that are not about Kate Harding's tweet or the small number of tweets in different languages (most foreign language tweets were "tagging" or calling other Twitter users' attention to the tweet by means of mention). These irrelevant tweets appear due to the lack of mediation Twitter accounts and threads used to undergo. Disregarding these irrelevant tweets, the remainder of the tweets that fall under the non-dominant themes still amass almost 22% of the tweets. Thus, these themes illustrate the nuances of feminist humour as applied to rape culture.

## Discussion

### Use of Feminist Humor as a Critique of Rape Myths

Much of the data in this study is in keeping with the literature on rape culture and rape myths as identified by Burt (1991) and subsequent research (i.e., Ash, Sanderson, Kumanyika, and Gramlich 2017; Carmody and Washington 2001; Cowan 2000; Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994, 1995; Payne, Lonsway, and Fitzgerald 1999; Weiss 2009). However, while extant research on rape myths focuses on four overarching themes, the data in this project was more nuanced. We identified seven overarching themes relative to stabbing as a metaphor for rape in the tweets made in response to Kate Harding in October 2017. These themes (biological essentialism, liability/responsibility, punitive, nothing happened/denial, consent, culture/normalization/no harm was done, and the work of God) are all used in humorous ways in order to call out and dispel rape myths. In keeping with Limor Shifman and Dafna Lemish's (2010) work, the humour employed in replies to Kate Harding's tweet focus on mocking the presence of rape myths and patriarchy in contemporary culture. Thus, the majority of the tweets offer an alternate narrative about the roles that both men and women play in assault. The tweets' ability to offer a unique perspective, in which women are apologizing to men for stabbing them, demonstrate how feminist humour can be used to understand the highly charged issue of sexual assault (Billig 2005; Boskin 1997).

One Twitter user tweeted, "I'm always asked why I am such a prodigious stabber. Men seem to love my knife play. They beg for it with their tight butts & ripped abs." This tweet, for example, plays on the idea of liability/responsibility and reverses the issue and gender binary so that it is the men who are "asking for it." It therefore demonstrates how feminist humour can critique rape myths by illustrating the absurdity of anyone *asking* to be stabbed. Twitter, as a

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social media channel, at this point allowed for feminist humour because it provided a space in which women could either ignore or subvert their gender roles (Cockburn 1992). When one female user tweets that "I already had my knife out. I'm just supposed to sheath it again after all that work? He ordered that expensive meal that I paid for," they are abandoning the performance of the female gender in order to demonstrate male domination. Furthermore, as seen by the number of tweets in the sample thread (n=489), it is seen that Twitter was able to help create an online community in which users could achieve and advocate for subtle yet powerful justice.
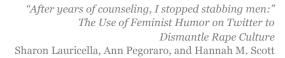
The feminist humour as applied to a critique of rape myths can be subversive; the tweets challenge the status quo by reversing the roles in an assault situation and demonstrating that men do not understand women's assault experiences. One user tweeted that, "I know a woman who went into treatment for stab addiction for a whole week...she respects men now." This reference to Harvey Weinstein, a man accused of sexually assaulting many Hollywood women, is meant to convey to the reader that men like Weinstein cannot understand the experiences of women who have been assaulted because they do not take their consequences seriously. This subversive humour allows for women to critique rape myths in a way that highlights the unreasonable consequences of male domination. While feminist humour such as that seen in the tweets has been critiqued for actually perpetuating the patriarchy and for male-bashing, the feminist humour used in relation to the Kate Harding tweet can therefore be constructive (Coser 1960; Stillion and White 1987).

Kate Harding's tweet hijacked the online, public space by interrupting the stream of men apologizing for assaulting women and offering a critique of these apologies. This critique allows users to observe the absurdity of the excuses that men have given and continue to give. Not surprisingly, no genuine apologies are offered in the tweets joining Harding's subversive tweet— they are *all* humorous. While this is arguably because of the intended jest of the posts, it also implies that an actual, real apology wouldn't even be needed (because it is wrong to begin with and shouldn't have happened). As demonstrated by the replies to Kate Harding's tweet, contemporary feminist humour follows the subversive comedy outlined by Bing (2008) and Hay (2000). However, the tweets that follow Harding's offer a more constructive take on men's apologies (or thinly veiled "excuses") for sexual assault.

Dominant Themes

*Liability/Responsibility*
Victim blaming has become an important theme in discussions about sexual assault; it often comes in the form of asking the victim what they are wearing or assuming that they asked for it. Liability and responsibility are prevalent in the theme of victim blaming through the ways in which shame and guilt are placed on the victim rather than the offender (Powell 2015). Feminist humour often takes this victim blaming sentiment and makes it extreme; this exaggeration can be seen in tweets such as, "I mean cargo shorts forget it. You already know they want it with their calves out there like that." The liability and responsibility theme is a re-occurring sentiment in the Harding replies, comprising nearly a quarter of the dataset analysed in this study. The prevalence of this theme is largely due to the notion that blaming the victim is often done by both the victim *and* the offender; it is a widespread myth that is so common that victims often fail to acknowledge the responsibility of their assaulters (Weiss 2009).

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### Culture/Normalization/No Harm was Done

The most significant theme identified in the data is the "culture/normalization/no harm was done" category. The theme accounts for 30% of tweets (n=147). The nuances of rape culture may have become more recognized in contemporary culture given the prolific sexual harassment claims against Harvey Weinstein, and resultant attention such as the 2019 film *Bombshell* and Farrow's (2019) investigative monograph *Catch and Kill*. As Jessalyn Keller, Kaitlynn Mendes, and Jessica Ringrose (2016) found, communication technologies such as Twitter, in combination with feminist humour, have the ability to educate users on rape culture. Normalization of sexual assault and the idea that sexual assault does no harm—key tenets in the perpetuation of rape culture—are apparent in the tweets made in parodic reply to Harding. Examples include references to Brock Turner, Donald Trump, and other notorious and infamous men who have been involved in sexual harassment narratives.

This category also refers to changing norms surrounding conversations of rape. One user tweeted, "Stabbing men was the culture back then" while another wrote that "I don't want my insurance premiums to pay for their antibiotics!" The latter tweet was posted in reference to the political culture surrounding reproductive bodily rights, including abortion. Sanday (2007) defines rape culture as an environment that increases risk factors related to sexual violence; calling out this culture is apparent in Twitter users' tweets made in response to Harding.
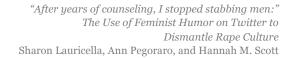
### Secondary Themes

### Biological Essentialism

Biological essentialism, or the suggestion that men and women have different prerogatives based on biological gender and that each gender is placed in different positions on a cultural hierarchy, is present in the current understanding of rape myths and the discussion of gender on binary terms. This theme also includes the idea that "boys will be boys" and that "men can't help it." Tweets such as "Frankly, if they're alone with a woman I don't know what they expect to happen. They know stabbing is a biological drive for us," demonstrate the biological essentialist view. Biological essentialism, as defined by Antonia Abbey, Pam McAuslan, and Lisa Thomson Ross (1998), is a cultural understanding that is present in the replies to Kate Harding's tweet. The theme is surprisingly only apparent in 5% (n=22) of the replies; this demonstrates that biological essentialism is still a cultural notion in Western society yet is arguably less popular due to the current evolution regarding sexual assault education, as embodied in movements such as #MeToo. While biological essentialism is still a present theme and an excuse that men give in so-called apologies, it is increasingly becoming a less legitimate form of apology, as demonstrated by its relative lack of employment in feminist humour.

### Punishment

Rape culture has contributed to the understanding that women need to be punished for their behaviour. "Slut shaming," a widespread rape myth, suggests that those who are assaulted deserve to have been made victims of violence. The theme of punishment and rape as a punitive measure was apparent in only three tweets (1%) made in reply to Harding. It is impossible to know precisely why this theme was not more apparent in the data, given that punitive measures and slut shaming are commonplace in contemporary Western rape culture. This result may be because women simply did not find it funny or suitable to joke about, or it may be that the harsh truth of the history of revenge rape, particularly in non-Western areas, is too sensitive a

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topic to make reference to in this context. The feminist humor in this dataset did not use the idea of punishment to critique sexual assault and men's apologies to any notable degree.
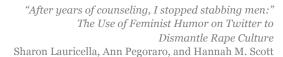
### Nothing Happened/Denial

A dominant rape myth in contemporary culture is the belief that rape does not happen or that women lie about rape to cover up infidelity (Weiss 2009). Yet another interpretation of victim blaming, the "nothing happened/denial" theme includes lying to obtain attention, "get ahead," or make money. This theme accounts for 4% (n=20) of the tweets made in reply to Harding. For example, one user tweeted, "Convenient how no one saw the stabbing and he didn't report it until other men came forward," offering a satirical response to the common misconception that women only come forward with sexual assault allegations for fame or attention. Feminist humour uses the nothing happened/denial frame to critique how people respond to and believe in victims' testimonies. These responses played directly off the scandal involving Harvey Weinstein, in which victims were dismissed with the accusation that they were lying and only coming forward in the wake of others who reported harassment and/or assault.

### Consent

Another dominant rape myth as outlined by Karen Weiss (2009) is that women secretly want to be forced and can prevent it if they really want to. Of all tweets made in reply to Harding, 9% referenced the theme of consent. For example, one user posted, "We're married, so how can I be guilty of stabbing him?" This category of responses to Harding indicates the misconception that marriage equals perpetual consent, and that consent is something that is passive, and not active. Concurrent with the cultural concept of consent, this theme also addresses both the biological excuses for rape (a woman's body can "shut down" rape and resultant pregnancy) and any cultural implications (that she could have just "stopped" it), but it also includes discussions regarding the changing understanding of what consent means: consent must be active to be considered legitimate. Feminist humour therefore seeks to critique rape culture and identify the idea of asking for and receiving consent. It illustrates the notion that consent must be actively given before and during a sexual encounter. The social misunderstanding of passive consent is called out by identifying that men mistakenly interpret and even imagine consent.

### The Work of God

In relation to the culture and normalization of rape, the "Work of God" theme, comprising 3% (n=17) of the overall thread of responses to Harding, demonstrates potential religious undertones of rape culture and sexual assault. This theme includes references to God's wish and the Bible. For example, one user tweeted, "No, these things happen for a reason. If God didn't want them to get germs, they wouldn't have been stabbed. Maybe they should pray more." This response to Harding's satirical tweet illustrates how religious values can be intertwined with victim blaming and rape culture. Here, feminist humour uses references to religiosity to critique how people use the idea of God or a spiritual text in order to blame the victim and absolve all guilt from the man, while placing responsibility onto either or both the victim and God. We argue that the inclusion of the "Work of God" theme is an important addition to list of rape myths as references to religion, particularly in today's political climate in the United States, and that this theme is deserving of further analysis in different contexts.

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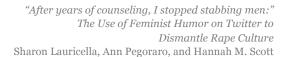
## Limitations and Future Directions

One of the limitations of this analysis is the means by which data were collected. The algorithm employed by Twitter maintained the most popular reply (by means of likes, retweets, and subsequent replies) as the first reply visible beneath the original tweet. In other words, the Twitter algorithm was based upon popularity of each tweet as gained by attracting replies and user responses. Thus, the most "popular" tweets in response to Harding's would have been the ones at the top of the Treeverse hierarchy. It is reasonable to assume that the most "popular" tweets would be the most indicative of agreement, endorsement, and ongoing discussion in this particular instance, though this caveat is important to disclose as a limitation in this analysis. Also, because Twitter was a social media channel in which anonymity was easily achieved, we cannot tell for certain if all or most of the replies made to Harding were posted by women. It could be argued that responses ought to be separated by sex/gender to examine potential differences. However, this proves impossible on social media because even though it might be reasonable to assume that someone with the name "Amy" is a woman or "Mike" is a man, this isn't always true, so replies could not be separated by gender in this analysis.

Subsequent research should consider the public responses and statements made by men after being accused of sexual assault; at very least, a collection of public, digitally-mediated responses can be systematically assessed. A potential research question may be, "What do men say on social media after being accused of sexual assault?" This future work is meaningful because in gathering data for this project, a search in academic databases for male response to accusations of sexual assault yielded only articles relevant to males as *victims* (Weiss 2010) or their role as potential *preventers* of sexual assault on university/college campuses (Schwartz and DeKeseredy 2008). However, there appears to be no extant literature on how men typically and publicly respond (particularly via social media) after they are *accused* of sexual assault. This research on how men respond publicly after a rape or sexual assault accusation can quantify and qualify the tone and content of apologies or excuses for this crime.

Additional further research could focus on the identified themes in rape culture as highlighted in this data, such as the "Work of God" and the pervasiveness of biological essentialism. Given the religious background of politicians such as former Vice President Mike Pence, and the connection of religiosity to increasing Republican control of access to abortion, this is a theme that deserves additional attention.

## Conclusion

Feminist Kate Harding bravely admitted that she stabbed men in her previous jobs, and like a responsible feminist, sought counselling to change her ways. How brave of her to admit her shortcomings on social media! Fortunately for Harding, Twitter users came to her support immediately, offering a variety of excuses and apologies that she could offer to her previous male victims and to the public. For example, Harding ought to have been absolved for the stabbings because men were asking to be stabbed. Really, how could a woman resist a man in cargo shorts in the workplace?! To dress that way, clearly he was asking for the stabbing. Further, Harding couldn't possibly bear all the blame for her behaviour. The culture in which she worked at the time of the crime was pervasive with stabbing, and the men were obviously asking for it! Even the Bible teaches that men are fit to be stabbed, and none of the stabbing was very harmful to anyone in the end (even though some of them lied about the stabbings just for

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money and fame). After all, men could have stopped the stabbing if they wanted, and let's be honest, they deserved it anyway.

Twitter users' responses to Harding called out and clearly identified rape myths as observed in literature on sexual assault. For example, amongst the most prominent themes in the tweets made in reply to Harding was identifying problems with normalizing the culture that absolves offenders and instead blames the victim. In addition to identifying and understanding the four overarching rape myths identified by Burt (1991) and addressed further in subsequent literature (i.e., Ash, Sanderson, Kumanyika, and Gramlich 2017; Carmody and Washington 2001; Cowan 2000; Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994, 1995; Payne, Lonsway, and Fitzgerald 1999; Weiss 2009), we identified more specific nuances in rape myths as identified in responses to Harding's tweet, including punishment, the work of God, and additional subtleties in the understanding of biological essentialism and the notion of active versus passive consent.

Harding's academic and professional work emphasizes that rape is not about sexuality but about power (2015, 12). Similarly, Robinson (2005) identified that male power in male groups is what perpetuates hegemonic masculinity and solidifies gendered cultural bonds amongst and between boys and men. These cultural norms support a patriarchal culture that excuses and normalizes rape. As indicated in the humorous tweets to Harding, women subverted the notion of male power by demonstrating the strength and unity amongst women by means of social media. Twitter is identified here as a pivotal social media channel through which communication technologies have been helpful "in mediating informal justice for rape" (Powell 2015). This humorous thread does not necessarily achieve justice per se, though it certainly makes strides in highlighting the absurdity and injustice inherent in contemporary cultural norms which support rape culture. The subversive capacity of feminist humour via Twitter is of particular importance given recent analyses of the subversive potential of other communicative channels such as sketch comedy (Tully 2017), film (Hahner and Varda 2017; Kelly 2016), and Tumblr (Ringrose and Lawrence 2018). As this manuscript goes to press, Twitter is rebranding to X, and users are migrating to other platforms such as Meta's Threads. We hope that positive and inclusive communication can characterize these new social venues.

Given that rape culture can only exist in the context of understanding gender as a binary opposite, in which men and women are considered separate and unequal, this concept also perpetuates heteronormativity, in which heterosexuality is both assumed and assimilated. All of the tweets in response to Harding were heteronormative in that they took on myths associated with male-on-female sexual assault as identified in Harding's original tweet. Thus, women adhered to the gender binary, yet this binary is addressed in such a way that does not infer superiority, but rather, calls out injustices associated with the hierarchy inherent in *any* gender binary. It is important to emphasize that the tweets collected for this study did not call out how sexual violence affects transgender and nonbinary people. As Manne (2018) notes, women are rewarded for adhering to and bolstering the patriarchy, whether they are aware of doing so or not. Thus, an unfortunate irony is that the tweets that women made—while humourous and calling out rape culture—simply mirrored the gender binary that created the problem in the first place. The next step in the feminist process, then, is for women to call out that which maintains compliance with the system so that those who are not cisgender women and who are affected by sexual violence are seen and heard with equality.

Feminist humour has been criticized for being either demeaning to men (Stillion and White 1987) and/or unintentionally perpetuating existing power structures (Coser 1960). However, feminist humour can build awareness and challenge male domination and patriarchal social organization (Case and Lippard 2009). Harding's tweet, and the subsequent replies and

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dialogue about it, not only identified a cultural problem and provided a means of coping and camaraderie amongst women, but also in keeping with research by Merrill (1998), these tweets offered very clear and tangible affirmation of women's experiences. However, the tweets did not challenge the gender binary by failing to address heteronormativity itself. To that end, the data in this project indicates that the subversive humour in Harding's tweet and replies made in the thread affirm rather than denigrate women and present the opportunity to understand more clearly the injustice experienced by—at least cisgender—women who are victims of sexual assault, with the next step being all-encompassing gender inclusion. Thus, we ask, *so what* if a man wears cargo shorts and exposes his "dad bod"? We'd be lying if we said we didn't really want to stab him.

## Notes

1. This paper uses victim-forward rather than survivor-based language. We adhere to this language in response to Harding's own (2020) essay explaining her choice to use victim-forward language, which she does in response to her own experience with rape.

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