

Modeling Policy-relevant Intent related to Gender Violence Myths on Social Media using Social Construction Theory

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Extended Abstract

The recent surge in women reporting (e.g., #metoo campaign) gender violence incidents of sexual assault and harassment has highlighted a long-standing societal crisis. The injustice endured by victims has been due, in part, to a culture that embraces rape myths and discredits women who report such crimes, especially the myth “women lie about rape”, which has been found to be one of the most frequently endorsed rape myths [1]. Given the increasing adoption of social media by different sections of the society, it can be explored as a novel data source to identify public attitudes – complementary to survey-based methods – that reflect and perpetuate prevailing social constructions towards the accused and accusers of sexual assault. Social media platforms facilitate informal online conversations and thus, present an opportunity to understand intentional messaging by users. This analysis identifies prominent Twitter message themes regarding sexual assault, with an eye towards understanding the extent of rape myths - especially the myth that ‘women lie about rape’. Using the guidance of social construction theory, we propose a novel policy-relevant intent categorization scheme for social media messages — as *accusational*, *validational*, or *sensational* — with implications for policy design for sexual assault. We then analyze a Twitter corpus for different themes in which intent regarding rape myths are expressed.

Background. Rape and sexual assault are pervasive, long-standing, societal problems. One out of every six American women, and one in every 33 men - or about 17% and 3% of the population, respectively - have been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime [2]. Rape or sexual assault are about half as likely to be reported to police as robbery (54%) and aggravated assault (58%), with the former being reported in only about a quarter of all cases (23%) [3]. Social stigma surrounding sexual crimes likely contributes to this low level of reporting, which in turn may embolden perpetrators, who act with relative impunity given the low level of reporting, and even more remote likelihood of prosecution. Rape and sexual assault constitute injustices that impose both health and financial costs on individuals, and society as a whole, while also furthering gender inequality. It is the role of law and policy to address public problems such as violent crimes out of an obligation to lessen harms, protect the autonomy of citizens, and secure justice. Public attitudes, such as those reflected in social media, contribute to policy formulation, and understanding the nature of the beliefs expressed on platforms like Twitter can inform policymakers, ultimately leading to improved policy development and outcomes.

Social Construction. In order to systematically explore social media data, we employ the guidance of social construction theory that helps explain how policy is influenced by perceptions of target populations [4], i.e. “who benefits and loses from policy change,” depending on whether they are seen positively in the public sphere. Those who are viewed in a negative light are less likely to find policies shaped in their favor, while those who are positively socially constructed and powerful - the “advantaged” - are more likely to be benefited by policy. Groups that are negatively socially constructed and weak - also known as

“deviants” in the original framework - are more likely to be condemned in public discourse and disadvantaged by policy. Sexual assault policies primarily affect two populations: accusers (victims) and the accused (perpetrators). Policies that facilitate the reporting and punishment of sexual assault benefit accusers, but are seen by some as infringing on the rights of the accused. Negative characterizations of accusers are evident in social constructions of women perpetuated through various means, which motivates our research on understanding social media conversations regarding sexual assault and intentionality of users that share a variety of information including myths.

Method. We collected public Twitter messages containing ‘rape’ and ‘sexual assault’ keywords using Twitter Streaming API between August 1 and December 1, 2016. We filtered the messages containing any potential myths by checking the lexicon: {lie, lying, lied, liar, hoax, fake, false, fabricated, made up}. In the filtered set, we extracted the most frequent ‘retweeted’ (forwarded) messages and asked two sexual assault policy subject-matter experts to review the top 100 messages for observing the intentions expressed about the key actors (women accusers) within the social construction framework regarding rape myths. We discovered three key categories of messages with varied intent types as shown in the Table 1. We then randomly sampled 2500 unique messages to code for intents and analyzed the contexts expressed within the intent categories using topic modeling. We propose to present an extensive analysis of our dataset during the conference.

Results. Our qualitative analysis found that *Accusational* intent messages (46%) are the most prevalent in social media, followed by *Sensational* (30%) and *Validational* (14%) intents, and others (10%). The context of *Accusational* messages reflected public beliefs that undermine the credibility of women who report rape and express more concern for accusers than the accused, with clear implications for policy design and outcomes. This study will help design a social computing system to mine diverse policy-relevant intent and context in social media around key actors in rape and sexual assault myths to help mitigate this societal crisis.

Table 1. Anonymized examples with varied intent in the conversation about sexual assault.

Twitter Message	Intent
@USER1 @USER2 and white women have lied about rape against black men for generations	<i>Accusational (express doubts about or undermine accusers)</i>
Listening to #Dutton say women on #Nauru who have been raped are often lying makes me sick. Showing us once again his misogyny & sexism	<i>Validational (express belief in the accuser and /or point out the injustice)</i>
There is no New Clinton, never has been. Shes the same rape defending, racist, homophobic liar shes been for 70 yrs URL	<i>Sensational (focus on provocation than the issue; primarily to frighten, politicize or sensationalize)</i>

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