'What a lying slut’: the (re)production of rape myths in online misogyny towards women disclosing their experiences of rape through the #MeToo movement

Erin Rennie, erin.rennie@gcu.ac.uk
Glasgow Caledonian University, UK

Online misogyny is a form of online abuse against women and girls which is rooted in a hatred and mistrust of women which seeks to silence them and reinforce gender inequalities. This study extends existing research in this area by examining online misogyny within the context of the #MeToo movement. The #MeToo movement created a safe space for women to share their experiences of sexual violence, and while this promoted solidarity, support and healing, there was also an abusive backlash towards the women involved. Based on a thematic analysis of abusive YouTube comments directed at women sharing their experiences of rape, it was found that 69 per cent of abusive comments were characterised by one or more of the seven rape myths: she asked for it, it wasn’t really rape, he didn’t mean to, she lied, rape is a trivial event, and rape is a deviant event. This article discusses each rape myth and demonstrates how rape myths are (re)produced in online misogyny towards victims/survivors of rape and concludes by arguing this response attempts to discredit victims/survivors, the #MeToo movement and disrupt the safe space the movement created to derail the collective conversation about men’s violence against women and girls.

Key words online misogyny • rape myths • #MeToo • feminist activism • men’s violence against women and girls

Key messages
• Online misogyny mimics offline misogyny and creates a hostile environment for women in the online space.
• Rape myths (she asked for it, it wasn’t really rape, he didn’t mean to, she wanted it, she lied, rape is a trivial event, and rape is a deviant event) shape online misogyny towards women disclosing their experiences of rape through the #MeToo movement to discredit victims/survivors, the #MeToo movement and interrupt the collective conversation about men’s violence against women and girls.
Introduction

The #MeToo movement provided a platform for victims/survivors to disclose experiences of sexual violence and raise awareness of men’s violence against women and girls (MVAWG), however, misogyny and violence permeate the online space which creates a hostile environment for victims/survivors. This article explores online misogyny, a type of online abuse against women, by looking at rape mythology in abusive YouTube comments directed at women who disclosed their experience of rape through the #MeToo movement. The offline MeToo movement began in 2006 when activist Tarana Burke created the campaign to empower women of colour. Over a decade later, the online movement began on 15 October 2017, when actress Alyssa Milano encouraged survivors to share experiences of sexual violence alongside the hashtag (Boyle, 2019). Arguably, the most successful online campaign against sexual violence, the #MeToo movement aimed to highlight the prevalence of sexual violence, challenge societal perceptions, break the silence around disclosure and provide a space for collective action. #MeToo galvanised millions of victims/survivors, and unlike other hashtags has remained relevant and continues to grow; it is no longer just a hashtag, but a global movement (Boyle, 2019; Anderson and Overby, 2021).

Despite the successes of the #MeToo movement, there has also been a documented misogynistic and violent backlash online (Andreasen, 2021; Taylor, 2021), which Bates (2020: 7) sombrely suggests is ‘one step forward and several steps back’. Online abuse refers to a range of acts which includes – but is not limited to – name-calling, offensive slurs, sexual harassment and threats of violence, rape and death (Amnesty International, 2017). Research suggests that women are subject to more online abuse than men, with women being 27 times more likely to be targeted (Jane, 2017). One in three UK women have experienced online abuse (Refuge, 2021), however, women who engage in feminist activism online appear to experience it more, with Lewis et al (2017) finding 88 per cent of women in their survey had experienced online abuse while discussing feminism. Online abuse can be committed by any gender; however, research demonstrates that it is overwhelmingly a male perpetrator (Jane, 2014; Amnesty International, 2017; Vera-Gray, 2017).

Online misogyny is a form of online abuse against women which targets them because they are women (Jane, 2017). It is rooted in offline misogyny, which is a hatred and mistrust of women and girls (Levey, 2018). Women’s experiences of internet hostility are not homogeneous, online misogyny intersects with other forms of abuse such as racism, homophobia, ageism and ableism. Research on online misogyny has identified three main types of abuse against women: gendered and sexualised slurs, attacks on women’s physical appearance, and threats of violence, rape and death (Jane, 2014; Megarry, 2014; Thompson, 2018). Online misogyny acts to make women feel unsafe online and restrict their engagement with the online space (Mendes et al, 2019). Multiple researchers argue that online misogyny aims to intimidate women into silence and exclude their voices from online discourse (Megarry, 2014; Jane, 2017; Lewis et al, 2017).
MVAWG was traditionally viewed as a private concern, women openly discussing their experiences on social media brings it into the public sphere and challenges the social silencing of violence (Salter, 2013). Abusive responses towards women’s disclosure of violence invalidates women’s perspectives and disrupts the conversation about MVAWG by creating a dangerous environment for victim/survivors (Vera-Gray, 2017). Nussbaum (2010) argues that online misogyny is disciplinary action to punish the target, which is particularly important within the context of the #MeToo movement and women’s disclosure of rape. I argue online misogyny towards victims/survivors is a punishment for those who dare to speak out, to deter them from doing so again and to warn others of the consequences. The #MeToo movement provides a safe space for victims/survivors to share their experiences, however, online misogyny hinders the safety of this space.

Drawing from a larger dataset of abusive YouTube comments directed at women sharing their experiences of rape within the context of the #MeToo movement, this article focuses on the (re)production of rape myths in online misogyny. Rape myths are commonly held, but incorrect assumptions about rape which trivialise women’s experiences, obscure the reality of rape and position the victim/survivor as partially or wholly responsible while diminishing the responsibility of the perpetrator (Payne et al, 1999; Grubb and Turner, 2012; Harding, 2015). Of 1493 abusive YouTube comments, 69 per cent (n=1033) were identified as (re)producing one or more of the seven rape myths: she asked for it, it wasn’t really rape, he didn’t mean to, she lied, rape is a trivial event, and rape is a deviant event. Rape myths serve to discredit and silence victims/survivors and justify the actions of perpetrators which contributes to an unsafe space for victims/survivors online; therefore, I argue that the prevalence of rape myths in online misogyny is a significant finding within the context of online disclosure of rape and the #MeToo movement.

While there has been research conducted on negative online discourse surrounding the #MeToo movement (see Boyle and Rathnayake, 2020; Andreasen, 2021), rape culture and rape myths in online discourse of rape cases (see Stubbs-Richardson et al, 2018), and positive and negative responses to women’s online disclosure of rape (see Salter, 2013), this article extends this area by looking at the nature of online misogyny towards victims/survivors within the context of the #MeToo movement and rape mythology.

Data collection and analysis

To explore the nature of online misogyny towards women sharing their experiences of rape within the #MeToo movement, I conducted a qualitative content analysis of YouTube comments. This unobtrusive method investigates user-generated content to shed light on internet communications without researcher interference (Social Media Research Group, 2016). Despite having millions of users, social media does not accurately represent the wider population and young, affluent, educated users are overrepresented (Levey, 2018). Therefore, this article does not claim to represent the general public’s perception or response to the #MeToo movement, but instead provides an examination of online discourse of the movement. I approached this research from a feminist perspective to centre existing gender inequalities and offline misogyny. This research exists within a societal context where the act of rape is trivialised, if believed at all (Boyle, 2019), therefore, a feminist lens is essential to situate online misogyny within the continuum of MVAWG.

There is academic debate on the ethics of social media research: some researchers argue that it is not ethical to use social media content without seeking permission...
from users, while others argue that the public nature of social media makes comments ‘fair game’ (Megarry, 2014: 48). To investigate the nature of online misogyny, online interactions must be studied, however, it would be impossible to collect comments on this scale with user permission, so the safety and privacy of users was carefully considered, and only publicly accessible data was used. YouTube was chosen as the site of data collection, as it does not require registration to view content and the comment section is a public forum, therefore, it was considered to be a more ethical choice as users are reasonably aware of the public nature of the platform. Although the #MeToo movement began on Twitter, Twitter’s policy requires usernames to be displayed if tweets are re-used (Social Media Research Group, 2016). If creators and commenters could be identified this would be ethically problematic, whereas YouTube enabled me to anonymise the original poster, the video and the commenters to protect users. Furthermore, given the conflict-ridden nature of this topic and evidence feminist research is targeted by online abuse (Vera-Gray, 2017), I decided a platform that facilitated anonymised data presentation was safer for myself and the women in the videos.

A YouTube search for ‘#MeToo’ was performed and videos were filtered in ascending order of popularity to provide videos with numerous comments. To be suitable, the video had to focus on women discussing their experiences of male-perpetrated rape within the context of the #MeToo movement. To provide a clear analysis, videos were rejected if there was also discussion of other topics, such as, reproductive rights and gun-control. Videos were also rejected if there was information suggesting negative comments were deleted. Five videos were selected to provide a large number of comments from varied sources. Each video featured one or more women sharing their personal experience, this included well-known women and lesser-known women; two videos were personal home recorded retellings and three were organised group discussions. As well as sharing their own experiences, women discussed the importance of the #MeToo movement and encouraged other women to share their stories.

From the videos, 4113 comments were exported using NVivo Ncapture, which provided a random selection of comments from each source. Comments were read multiple times and organised as either abusive or non-abusive. Abusive comments ranged from subtly abusive, such as ‘there’s 100 percent insanity pouring out of every pore of her face I wouldn’t be surprised if she made all that shit up’, to overtly abusive, such as, ‘Fuck her ill rape her ass right now…fuck women wait till men realize what ur doing. I mistreat women now specifically because of this movement.’ Not all negative comments were categorised as abusive, only if they were viewed as crossing the line from disagreement, genuine debate, and political criticism to being vitriolic, offensive and/or violent. For example, ‘I AM NOT CALLING HER A LIAR, I just wonder WHY she would agree to work with that vile piece of human garbage again. I do wish her well’ was identified as non-abusive as although it was critical, it was not viewed as going beyond legitimate debate. I identified 1493 (36%) comments as abusive, which were taken forward for further analysis. I analysed these thematically to explore the patterns of online misogyny in abuse towards women disclosing rape, following Terry et al’s (2017) six-step approach: familiarising oneself with the data, generating codes, constructing themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Seven main themes were developed to identify the prominent patterns in the comments: rape myths, personal
attacks, silencing and disciplinary discourse, sexist stereotypes, sexualisation, feminist backlash and hashtag disruption. Of 1493 comments, 69 per cent (n=1033) were identified as (re)producing one or more of the seven rape myths. While numerous adaptations of rape myths exist, to organise this theme I used Payne, Lonsway and Fitzgerald’s (1999) classification: she asked for it, it wasn’t really rape, he didn’t mean to, she wanted it, she lied, rape is a trivial event, and rape is a deviant event. Through development of the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA), they argued the various beliefs about the victim/survivor, the perpetrator and the act of rape could generally fit into these seven categories. These categories succinctly encapsulated my data, and each myth allowed me to explore the different aspects of the rape mythology that was (re)produced throughout the comments.

Findings and discussion

Rape myths were consistently (re)produced in the online misogyny towards women disclosing their experiences of rape through the #MeToo movement, with 69 per cent (n=1033) of comments portraying one or more of the seven rape myths: she asked for it, it wasn’t really rape, he didn’t mean to, she wanted it, she lied, rape is a trivial event and rape is a deviant event. The following discussion will look at each myth individually, with examples (full comments and extracts) from the data to illustrate how rape mythology shaped comments. Following Jane (2017), data is presented verbatim to avoid censoring online misogyny and hiding its distinct characteristics of violence and obscenity.

Note on commenter gender

Social media allows for anonymity and obscured identity; therefore, it is difficult to analyse demographic information (Social Media Research Group, 2016), however, from the account information provided by NVivo NCapture an analysis of commenter gender was conducted. From 1033 comments, 820 commenters used identifiable forenames on their YouTube accounts which were assigned a gender with assistance from Babycenter’s baby name database; 680 accounts (82.92%) used traditionally male names and 140 accounts (17.08%) used traditionally female names. While it is important to consider the reliability of this analysis – non-identifiable names, non-gender specific names, pseudonyms – this suggested most abusive comments in the sample were from men. This corresponds with previous studies that suggest online misogyny against women is primarily perpetrated by men (Amnesty International, 2017; Jane, 2017). While this claim is limited, it provides context for the following findings.

She asked for it

The ‘she asked for it’ myth is based on the idea that women’s actions can provoke rape such as flirting or willingly meeting a man (Payne et al, 1999). The ‘she asked for it’ myth works to shift the blame from the perpetrator to the victim/survivor and relies on the notion only ‘certain types’ of women are victimised (for example, sexually active women, or women who are perceived to take risks) (Kelly, 1988; Taylor, 2021). If it is believed rape only happens to ‘deviant’ women, victims/survivors are viewed
as responsible, while perpetrators are excused for their behaviour as she somehow ‘asked for it’ based on her behaviour (Stubbs-Richardson et al, 2018). This myth was (re)produced in the comments through various justifications for what happened, claiming women put themselves in a position that led to their rape, for example:

She deserves it for being stupid. They all do really. All those victims willingly go into these execs’ hotel room for ‘business’

She made many mistakes that created an opening for that situation to happen. … raped on the second date at your bed at your room at your house maybe… you’re own will?

Within these comments, the focus was on the victim/survivor – framing them as partially, or completely responsible – while ignoring the actions of the perpetrator. In a survey of over 8000 UK adults, the Fawcett Society (2017) found 34 per cent of women and 38 per cent of men blame women if they are raped. This victim-blaming attitude is clearly demonstrated in the comments: rather than holding the rapist accountable, commenters consistently turned the conversation into a critique of the victim/survivor’s behaviour. Harding (2015: 24) suggests that this myth is based on the belief that women deserve to be raped rather than they are literally asking for it, as she puts it, ‘rape, by definition, is sex you did not ask for’. These comments were based on the belief that women’s choices encouraged rape, like the first comment labelling the victim/survivor as ‘stupid’ because of her behaviour before the attack and therefore, she ‘deserves it’. Women were consistently scrutinised, particularly through slut-shaming, which is to judge women’s real or perceived sexual history (Stubbs-Richardson et al, 2018). If women are perceived to have failed to conform with passive female sexuality and had ‘too many’ sexual partners (Levey, 2018), they were positioned as deserving of rape as a punishment, for example:

Why do women dress like sluts, act like sluts, then get mad when a man treats them like one? News flash… if you don’t want negative attention, don’t go out of you’re way to get it!

SHE’S FULL OF SHIT, THE POLICE DIDN’T BELIEVE YOU’ BECAUSEYOU’RE A ‘SLUT’WITH MAYBE A 500 DICKS HISTORY

Whores get raped!

The words ‘slut’ and ‘whore’ were used repeatedly throughout the comments, with ‘slut’ being used 330 times and ‘whore’ (including its variations ‘ho’ and ‘hoe’) being used 246 times. Research suggests that these slurs are frequently directed at women in online spaces to shame them, particularly if they express sexual agency (Jane 2017; Thompson, 2018), and serve as a public branding to regulate women’s behaviour (Levey, 2018). The commenters labelled victims/survivors as ‘sluts’ and ‘whores’ to justify their rape, the comment suggesting that the police didn’t believe the victim/survivor because she was perceived as a ‘slut’ is indicative of this assumption and
attempts to deny the occurrence of rape based on assumed sexual history. The ‘she asked for it’ myth was (re)produced through victim-blaming and slut-shaming. Rather than holding perpetrators accountable, victims/survivors’ behaviour was scrutinised, and their perceived sexual history was used to judge their credibility, and therefore, the legitimacy of their claim.

It wasn’t really rape

The ‘it wasn’t really rape’ myth refers to the belief that different degrees of rape exist, where only the most extreme attacks are perceived as ‘real rape’ (Payne et al., 1999), which inevitably undermines most women’s experiences. This myth acts to dismiss women’s stories and reframes their assaults as something that should not be taken seriously or denies that anything happened at all (Harding, 2015). This myth was (re)produced in the comments through comparisons of women’s stories with incidents of what commenters perceived as ‘real rape’, while claiming that the women’s stories were not rape, for example:

Maybe she can take a look at the real rapings that have been going on. Rotherham, Telford, Malmo… #metoo is a disgusting joke!

There are certain degrees of harassment that qualify as assault and there are others that don’t deserve a 2nd thought really.

I have a HARD time believing ALL these stories. maybe there was sexual harassment but out and out rape I’m not totally convinced.

The ‘out and out rape’ comment clearly demonstrates the hierarchal understanding of rape and belief in grey areas, where incidents can sit somewhere between consensual sex and the accepted definition of rape (Mulder and Olsohn, 2021). Commenter’s perceptions of ‘real rape’ were at the extreme end of women’s experiences and were characterised by physical force and violence, for example:

these hoes act as if they had a gun put to their head and was made to suck and fuck. It’s a such thing as no stop acting like they just raped.

lol women get theyre skulls fractured being raped in a parking garage or some shit and all these hoes are out here like im a victim

As demonstrated in these comments, people generally view rape as a brutal attack by a violent stranger with a weapon (Payne et al., 1999; Mendes, 2015), which is not an accurate depiction of most rapes, which are typically committed by an acquaintance and based on sexual coercion and intimidation rather than brute force (Harding, 2015; Taylor, 2021). A narrow understanding of rape makes it almost impossible for women to be believed unless they meet strict criteria. Despite the women featured in the videos referring to their experiences as rape, this was consistently questioned. Commenters reframed women’s stories based on their incorrect perceptions and dismissed women’s understandings of their experiences. The (re)production of the ‘it
wasn’t really rape’ myth invalidates women’s perspectives and dismisses the collective conversation about MVAWG.

He didn’t mean to

The ‘he didn’t mean to’ myth refers to the belief that rape can be accidental, with perpetrators’ actions being excused by miscommunication or claims that they got a bit carried away (Payne et al, 1999). Like the ‘it wasn’t really rape’ myth, the ‘he didn’t mean to’ myth further indicates a hierarchical understanding of rape with various grey areas, with incidents often being downplayed as ‘sex gone a bit wrong’ (Mendes, 2015: 7). Again, this minimises perpetrator responsibility and dismisses the victim/survivor’s understanding of their own experience. In the same vein as the ‘she asked for it’ myth, the ‘he didn’t mean to’ myth was (re)produced in the comments by excusing men’s behaviour, instead blaming the victim/survivor for misleading the perpetrator, for example:

I agree that he was being a bit forceful, but it seems that she was conflicted and sending mixed signals

Men think of sex 24/7 a thing we can’t really control. Then some get enough courage to ask a girl out or flirt with them. I am just saying some girls flirt so much that a man could get the wrong idea

As demonstrated in the last comment, men’s sexual desires are viewed as something they ‘can’t really control’ and male sexual aggression is viewed as an inherent part of masculinity (Mendes, 2015). This narrative was consistent, with commenters suggesting that men are entitled to sex, consensual or not, for example:

When you fail to realize that the entire third-wave feminism movement is women complaining about men doing things that men naturally do women are merely the receptacle that men cum in…unless that specific fact changes then nothing will change

If you are a weak woman who freezes when a man comes on to you, well you just better wear a chastity belt around men.

The naturalisation of male violence justifies the ‘he didn’t mean to’ myth, if society believes men have uncontrollable sexual urges, men are viewed as hardwired to commit rape and it is women’s responsibility to control this to prevent rape (Taylor, 2021). As described in that last comment, if women are not able to protect themselves, they should ‘wear a chastity belt around men’, which suggests rape is inevitable and women’s responsibility. In an examination of conversations within the ‘manosphere’ (a loose network of online male communities who promote anti-female and anti-feminist content), Bates (2020) discovered extensive support for the belief that men are entitled to women’s bodies and rape is a natural consequence of men’s sexuality. Like the comments identified here, she described how this understanding underpinned the belief that it is women’s responsibility to avoid rape. Once again, these comments reframe responsibility, portraying the perpetrator as making an honest mistake and
the victim/survivor as failing to prevent the situation. The (re)production of the ‘he didn’t mean to’ myth diverts the conversation from how society can tackle the widespread problem of MVAWG to how individual women can avoid rape, and therefore, interrupts the message of the #MeToo movement.

She wanted it

The ‘she wanted it’ myth assumes that the victim/survivor was not genuinely forced into it, gave consent, or secretly enjoyed it (Payne et al, 1999). This myth is based on expectations of passive female sexuality and the belief women desire to be taken violently by a man. Based on traditional sexual scripts, women are supposed to act ‘respectfully’ and resist male advances to mitigate shame and preserve their reputations. This feeds into people’s understandings of consent, where women’s protests may not be real, but a part of sexual foreplay, and thus, it is often assumed that women say no, when they really mean yes (Kelly, 1988; Edwards et al, 2011; Taylor, 2021). Like the ‘he didn’t mean to’ myth, these commenters provided excuses for perpetrators’ behaviour and again placed the onus on women to control the encounter. This myth was (re)produced in comments by positioning women as consenting participants rather than victims/survivors, for example:

You can’t rape the willing!!!

She loved it… She wanted it over and over again

come on she’s lying she wanted the d

As demonstrated in these comments, despite the women in the videos identifying their encounters as rape and expressing the harm and trauma it caused them, commenters dismissed this and accused them of wanting it and even enjoying it. There is a belief that if a woman does not want to be raped, she can stop it, so a woman who is raped, somehow ‘allowed’ it to happen (Edwards et al, 2011). This thinking shaped the response, with commenters asserting that if women really didn’t ‘want it’, they would have said no, left or fought back, for example:

raped women fight and not sit with her legs up… whore.

I just find it funny that none of them try to avoid and resist these rapes, you have the option of saying no

No bruises? No scratches? Nothing????? Fuck her

As shown here, women are positioned as responsible for controlling the situation and legitimate rape victims/survivors are assumed to have assertively said no and put up a physical fight. Taylor (2021) suggests that active resistance can result in the perpetrator simply ignoring it or an escalation of violence, whereas more passive forms of resistance, such as trying to placate the situation, can be safer for women and mitigate escalation. Interestingly, as demonstrated here, commenters’ suggestions to ‘resist’ rape contradict how commenters appear to view rape; if a woman is experiencing the situation which commenters believe is legitimate rape (extremely violent attack with a weapon), how
would women just be able to say no or leave? This conflicting viewpoint suggests that no matter what a woman does in the situation it will never be enough, she will always be positioned as somewhat responsible based on the seven rape myths. The (re)production of the ‘she wanted it’ myth results in a narrative of victim/survivor complicity while absolving the perpetrator of responsibility or denying that a rape even occurred, which discredits women’s experiences and trivialises MVAWG.

She lied

The ‘she lied’ myth is based on the belief women regularly lie about rape for multiple reasons, such as regret, revenge, attention, or to protect their reputation (Payne et al, 1999; Taylor, 2021). This myth was (re)produced in the comments through accusations that their experience didn’t happen at all, or it was consensual and she changed her mind afterwards, for example:

She’s a fucking liar. He didn’t do anything to her. Load of shit. People who say it lie half the time for attention

There’s plenty of cases of females being sluts then catching regret, accusing the person she sought dick from of raping her.

What a lying slut. Go fucking get gangbanged by the same men your accusing and let them fill you with their fucking semen till you choke out on their dicks and die like the little lying cum slut you are.

This last comment labels the victim/survivor a ‘lying slut’ while wishing sexual violence on her, the denial of her experience and veiled threat acts to punishment her for speaking out and supposedly lying. Bates (2020) argues disbelief is the first great silencer, the idea that women ‘cry rape’ acts to deny the true prevalence of rape and conceals the problem on a societal scale. Expressing disbelief in women’s stories is an individual attack but can have a wider impact, Harding (2015) argues that it is a warning to other women who may speak out. It suggests to women that it is not worth the risk of disclosing their experiences as they may not be believed and experience this response too. As well as accusing individual women of lying, commenters referred to the perceived commonality of false accusations. There was an overarching idea that false accusations are not only common, but the real issue and society should be concerned about the prospect of fake accusations ruining men’s lives, not MVAWG, for example:

If all people falsely accused of sexual harassment were to speak out would we get a sense of the problem.

someone should make a list of ‘lying women you can’t trust’

For every #metoo there 100 men who have had theyre life destroyed by a women #himtoo

As demonstrated in these comments, the belief that women lie about rape is consistently over-estimated in the discourse surrounding MVAWG (Grubb and Turner, 2012;
Despite evidence indicating false accusations of rape are rare and not higher than other crimes (Kelly, 2010), online men’s rights groups promote the narrative of an ‘epidemic’ of false accusations (Jane, 2018: 666). Bates (2020) argues this discourse is to dismiss the issue and discourage women from speaking out. Mendes (2015) discovered that this assumption was prevalent in online misogyny towards women who participated in SlutWalks, where people argued the men accused of rape have it worse than victims/survivors of rape and are the real victims. This idea shaped the comments with commenters arguing that the #MeToo movement was harmful to men, something women could take advantage of to ruin men’s lives. As shown in that last comment, the use of ‘#himtoo’ hijacks the original #MeToo hashtag and interrupts the discourse, which shifts the focus away from the prevalence of MVAWG to how the #MeToo movement could affect men. Realistically, very few men receive consequences for committing rape, with figures showing that 98 per cent of reported rapes in England and Wales 2019–2020 did not even make it to court (Home Office, 2020). #MeToo is not a threat to men, men’s lives are not routinely being destroyed by false accusations of rape, however, online misogyny is a threat to victims/survivors and is simply another tactic to dismiss women’s experiences of MVAWG. Calling women liars is a form of silencing to deny their experiences and discourage disclosure. The (re)production of the ‘she lied’ myth demonstrates rape denial on an individual and collective level to challenge victims/survivors and the #MeToo movement.

**Rape is a trivial event**

The ‘rape is a trivial event’ myth assumes rape is not that serious, which works to reduce the perceived harm of rape (Payne et al, 1999). The impact of rape is often underestimated, which denies the true nature of rape and acts to dismiss any potential harm and long-lasting effects (Taylor, 2021). This myth was (re)produced in the comments through minimisation and mockery. Several commenters dismissed women’s claims of harm and suggested that they were making a big deal out of nothing, for example:

Boo fucking hoo… Men have also been harassed we call it being flirted at by a woman.

BITCH, SHUT UPPPPP. NO ONE CARES #getoverit

You poor thing. That must’ve been quite traumatic. You’re sooo brave, and you have my sympathy…but you must understand that in the broad scheme of things, as sympathy goes, this (quite aptly) deserves no more than a handful!

These comments frame women’s perception of their experiences as an overreaction and attempt to dismiss victims/survivors’ understanding of their trauma. As demonstrated in these comments, women were viewed as not deserving of sympathy and should simply ‘get over it’. Women are often viewed as dramatic and emotional, thus are often not taken seriously when describing their perspectives and women and feminists are accused of exaggerating the impact of rape for sympathy and political traction (Edwards et al, 2011; Harding, 2015). This positions rape as something women need to accept and deal with, which further works to ignore women’s experiences and excuse men’s behaviour. To further trivialise women’s experiences, commenters used mockery which undermined women’s stories, for example:
I scratched my crotch next to a lady at the bus and now she is a survivor in the #metoo movement.

#metoo My Nan called me handsome this one time.

#metoo I was repeatedly raped by a 8ft kangaroo during the summer of 2003…

Jane (2017) claims humour is a common tactic used in online misogyny to delegitimise women’s experiences and distract from the seriousness of the conversation. As shown here, commenters used jokes alongside the #MeToo hashtag to co-opt the original intention of the hashtag by conflating victims/survivors’ experiences with joke examples. Drakett et al (2018) argue that by framing rape within humour positions it as something acceptable and normal, which minimises harm. This myth suggests that the individual impact and societal severity of the problem of rape is an overreaction, which trivialises the #MeToo movement and victims/survivors’ experiences. The (re)production of the ‘rape is a trivial event’ myth positions the #MeToo movement as something that does not need to be taken seriously, which in turn, positions the problem of rape and MVAWG as something society does not need to tackle.

**Rape is a deviant event**

The ‘rape is a deviant event’ myth is based on the idea that rape is rare, and when it does occur, it is committed by mentally ill, evil predators; not normal men (Payne et al, 1999). Like the accusation women and feminists exaggerate the seriousness of rape, this myth is based on the belief the prevalence is also exaggerated (Mendes, 2015). This myth was (re)produced in the comments through questioning the commonality of rape, for example:

NOT THIS MANY PEOPLE HAVE BEEN RAPED. Jesus Christ.

wow, rape is more common in america than brazil or the middle east now???
CALM DOWN CUNT

As demonstrated here, these comments suggest a sceptical view of women’s stories due to the assumption that rape is rare, they deny that there is a widespread problem, which dismisses the true prevalence of rape and individual women’s stories. Despite none of the women in the videos claiming that all men are violent, only sharing their individual experiences and discussing the general prevalence of violence, the comments were proliferated with the ‘#notallmen’ argument, for example:

i fucking hate this argument. ‘all women have stories about sexual misconduct’
a small percentage of man are responsible for the majority of offenses,
particularly the more vile ones. #notallmen

There is a small subset of men that are horrible, that are predators and should be held accountable. The #metoo movement is just a bunch of cluster b attention whores
The ‘#notallmen’ argument is common in online discourse about MVAWG as a diversion tactic to derail the conversation into a defence of men as a group, rather than women’s individual experiences of male violence (Jackson et al, 2019). Instead of acknowledging MVAWG as a societal issue, these comments dismiss MVAWG and claim that few men commit these acts. By claiming that it is only a few bad apples, these comments question the need for a collective movement as it suggests that it is not a real problem that needs to be addressed on a macro level. The (re)production of the ‘rape is a deviant event’ myth demonstrates a refusal to believe the extent of rape which in turn makes it seem reasonable to question women’s stories. One in three women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence during their lifetime (World Health Organisation, 2021) – rape is not a deviant event.

Harding (2015) argues that the ‘rape is a deviant event’ myth holds up the other six myths, if people believe ‘real rape’ is rare, it is easier to believe the other myths. If people believe that rape is a deviant event, there just cannot possibly be as many instances of rape as women and activists claim, so other explanations, such as she lied or he got confused, appear plausible. This challenges the need for a movement like #MeToo and makes it seem reasonable to cast doubt on women’s stories. The (re)production of rape myths in online misogyny towards women sharing their experiences of rape through the #MeToo movement attempts to discredit and silence individual women and the wider movement by creating an unsafe space online for victim/survivors.

Conclusion

In this article, I have demonstrated how rape myths are (re)produced in online misogyny towards women who shared their experiences of rape on YouTube through the #MeToo movement. My findings suggest that women who speak out about rape are met with a vicious backlash which is characterised by victim-blaming and rape denial based on the seven rape myths: she asked for it, it wasn’t really rape, he didn’t mean to, she wanted it, she lied, rape is a trivial event, and rape is a deviant event. Rape myths contribute to an unsafe space for online disclosure of rape for victims/survivors. Although these myths represent various aspects of society’s perception of rape, they all work together to reframe the incident and place the blame on the victim/survivor or deny that an incident of rape occurred at all. Dismissing and denying incidents of rape allows society to ignore individual women’s claims while simultaneously downplaying the monumental problem of MVAWG. The (re)production of rape myths online creates a hostile environment for victims/survivors where they are critiqued and disbelieved, thus, my analysis extends the argument made by previous researchers that online misogyny seeks to silence women’s stories and invalidate their experiences (Megarry, 2014; Jane, 2017; Vera-Gray, 2017).

Women’s experiences of rape have traditionally been kept private, however, the #MeToo movement gives women a safe space to share their stories and bring rape into public discourse, however, social media is not always a safe platform for women due to the pervasive presence of online misogyny. This response acts to discipline women who have spoken out and attempts to discourage them from doing so again in the future and provides a warning to all women to conform and stay silent, otherwise they may meet the same fate (Levey, 2018). Considering the importance of silence breaking within the #MeToo movement, this is particularly important, while the #MeToo movement is attempting to deconstruct and challenge rape myths, my
findings suggest that the backlash is based on the exact ideology activists are trying to challenge. I argue that the (re)production of rape myths in online misogyny towards victims/survivors acts to not only attack individual stories but attempts to prevent other women from speaking out by disrupting the safe space created by the movement.

By extending knowledge of online misogyny, this research may be the first to examine the use of rape myths online towards victims/survivors of rape telling their stories through the #MeToo movement. Insensitive and/or negative responses to victims/survivors can result in secondary victimisation which can affect women’s recovery, mental health and limit future disclosure (Campbell and Raja, 1999; Grubb and Turner, 2012; Anderson and Overby, 2021). Online misogyny hinders victims/survivors’ ability to share their experiences free from judgement, and as shown in this article, can result in a violent and threatening response. The impact of online misogyny on secondary victimisation and disclosure of rape is unknown and warrants further research, however, a negative online response may have a similar impact as a negative offline response. I posit experiencing and/or witnessing this kind of discourse online could result in feelings of invalidation, disempowerment, fear and secondary victimisation for victims/survivors, and ultimately limit formal and informal disclosure. While beyond the scope of this article, future research should examine women’s lived experiences of online misogyny towards their online disclosure of rape.

To conclude, this article demonstrated how rape myths shaped online misogyny towards women who disclosed their experience of rape online through the #MeToo movement. The #MeToo movement provided a safe space for victims/survivors to discuss their experiences, however, online misogyny disrupts this space and makes it potentially dangerous for women to share their experiences. Online misogyny towards victims/survivors is an attempt to silence and discipline women for speaking out about the unspeakable. The #MeToo movement has empowered millions of women to come forward with their experiences, however, the (re)production of rape myths in online misogyny hinders the safety of the online space for victims/survivors and disrupts the conversation about men’s violence against women and girls.

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Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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Refuge (2021) Unsocial Spaces, United Kingdom: Refuge.


