

Research Article

Sexual Violence in Canadian News Media: Feminist Possibilities and Challenges in the Era of #MeToo

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Abstract

This study examines Canadian news coverage of sexual violence in the era of #MeToo, which sparked an unprecedented sharing of stories of sexual assault globally. These stories revealed the gendered nature of sexual violence, reaffirming its ubiquity in women's lives, and demanded reforms to ensure accountability and justice for victim/survivors. In this paper, using thematic analysis and drawing on scholarship on gender, media, and violence against women, we identify and explore the key themes in the ways sexual violence — primarily its causes, contexts, and consequences — is reported, portrayed, and commented upon in Canadian newspapers. Our findings indicate that although there has been increased recognition of sexual violence as a widespread social and cultural problem, the patterns in media coverage remain uneven. On the one hand, feminist perspectives that understand sexual violence as rooted in power imbalances, specifically gender inequalities, and problematize the institutional failures in supporting victim/survivors have gained greater visibility in news media. On the other hand, news coverage remains fraught with sympathetic portrayals of perpetrators, skepticism toward victim/survivors, and a reluctance to contextualize sexual violence within broader gender norms and inequities. Overall, our analysis suggests that while feminist insights — about the nature, workings, and effects of sexual violence — have made their way into mainstream news discourse, their integration is limited, inconsistent, and precarious. This argument advances current debates on the possibilities and limits of news media to effectively address sexual violence, its roots and adverse consequences.

Keywords: Canadian newspapers, gender, media, rape myths, sexual assault, sexual violence, #MeToo.

Introduction

In 2020, the Global Media Monitoring Project, the largest research and advocacy initiative for gender equality in the media, reported that “change in the gender dimensions of news media” has been “small and slow” with women’s perspectives being underrepresented “even in stories that affected women profoundly, such as gender-based violence” (p. 1). The report noted that women constituted a minority of the sources in sexual assault stories depicted in newspapers (p. 26), often leading to limited, inaccurate, and harmful representations. This finding corroborates previous literature showing that the voices of victim/survivors¹ are rarely heard in news media, which has been known to engage in minimization, disbelief, and victim blaming (Benedict, 1992; Cuklanz, 1996).

Yet recently, feminist perspectives have begun to make their way into the media, challenging dominant narratives (Barker-Plummer, 2010). While this change has evolved from decades of feminist activism and academic work that understands sexual violence as rooted in gender inequalities, the impact of the #MeToo movement has been unprecedented, creating “a rupture in public discussions and perceptions about sexual harassment and violence” (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019, p. 33). Most distinctively, #MeToo stories prioritized firsthand accounts of victim/survivors, exposing the prevalence of sexual violence, and offered a strong critique of institutional responses to cases of sexual assault. The digitalization of news media has played a key role in this shift by enabling alternative channels for the distribution and rapid dissemination of information (Praprotnik, 2016, p. 91). Importantly, journalistic investigations, especially those amplified online have shaped public discourse and, in some cases, led to tangible consequences for individuals accused of misconduct, even without criminal convictions. For example, Borelli-Kjaer, Schack, and Nielsson (2021) examined approximately 200 cases of workplace sexual harassment in the United States and found that particularly those involving CEOs and receiving high coverage, led to significant market value losses, averaging a 1.5% drop over two days, primarily due to shifts in public sentiment. This highlights the media’s unique power to enforce reputational accountability, influencing societal perceptions and serving as a critical site for how sexual violence is discussed and addressed. It is in this shifting discursive

¹ We use the term victim/survivor to refer to someone who experienced sexual violence regardless of whether they pursued a legal process or fully ‘recovered’ from its effects. This choice of terminology is informed by feminist debates about the extent and meaning of sexual victimization (Kelly et al., 1996) and reflects our position that victimhood and survival are not as discrete as they appear to be but rather often overlap in stories of sexual victimization.

landscape that this research examines the portrayals of sexual violence in major Canadian newspapers.

This study is built on three main assumptions. First, we begin with the idea that sexual violence is a pervasive gendered crime with adverse effects on the victim/survivor (Campbell, 2002; Dworkin et al., 2017), and both a cause and an outcome of structural power inequalities (Armstrong et al., 2018). Additionally, we believe that *how* sexual violence is framed in the media is crucial because of the latter's power to influence public perceptions of violence against women (Anastasio & Costa, 2004; Sacco, 1995) and to drive criminal justice policy (Doyle, 2003).

Second, we hold the view that news is socially constructed and that “how we think about social problems reflect[s] the characteristics of the larger culture around us” (Loseke & Best, 2003, p. 4). This view stresses the importance of understanding the effects of #MeToo on news media, which has been resistant, if not impervious, to feminist critique (Boyle & Berridge, 2023). Third, we adopt the feminist perspective that social institutions play a key role in reinforcing patriarchal assumptions, norms, and practices. Accordingly, we see the media as part of the “conducive context” (Kelly, 2016) for gender-based violence but also recognize that they can occasionally unsettle that context and prompt social change.

We acknowledge that the #MeToo movement was founded by African American anti-sexual violence activist and survivor Tarana Burke, who coined and first used the phrase “me too” in 2006 primarily to “connect with the black and brown girls in the [youth] program [she] ran” (Burke, 2017) and to give voice to their lived experiences of sexual assault. Given our interest in tracing the impact of #MeToo on news media depictions of sexual violence, in this study, we focus on the period following the viralization of the #MeToo hashtag in the fall of 2017. More specifically, we analyze news articles published between 2017, when Alyssa Milano tweeted, “[i]f you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet” and 2024.² Using thematic analysis and drawing on scholarship on gender, media, and violence against women, we identify and explore the key themes in the ways sexual violence — primarily its causes, contexts, and consequences — is reported, portrayed, and commented upon in Canadian newspapers. We find that mainstream news coverage continues to be informed by law-and-order perspectives (Barak, 2007) and only rarely

² Right before Milano’s tweet sparked an unparalleled sharing of personal sexual violence stories on digital media, The New York Times published a report that revealed multiple allegations of sexual harassment against the American film producer Harvey Weinstein. The report was prepared by journalists Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey (2017; see also 2019) and “led to the resignation of four members of the Weinstein Company’s all-male board, and to Weinstein’s firing” (Farrow, 2017).

frames sexual violence within gendered norms, relations, and/or inequalities. Furthermore, recent news routinely speaks highly of perpetrators and uses language that elicits skepticism toward the victim/survivor. Notably, we also find that sexual violence is increasingly acknowledged as a societal – and cultural – problem that has serious implications for victim/survivors. Additionally, news media incorporate a wider array of perspectives. Below, we show and argue that feminist insights — about the nature, workings, and effects of sexual violence — permeate mainstream news discourse, albeit in inconsistent ways.

Media Representations of Sexual Violence and #MeToo

News media are the primary source of information for individuals to form an understanding of social issues (Barak, 1994), including sexual violence (Soothill, 1991). A Canadian survey recently found that, across all generations, news media is considered the most credible (Kaiser & Partners, 2023). Evidently, even in the face of an evolving media landscape and the rise of social media, newspapers still “inspire public confidence” and remain “the gold standard for verification” (CMRC, 2011, p. 6) among Canadians.

While media reception is a complex process of meaning-making, shaped by the perspectives and experiences of individuals (Livingstone & Reiner, 2009), audience research shows that media portrayals reinforce particular attitudes toward violent crime, specifically sexual assault (Anastasio & Costa, 2004; Franiuk et al., 2008). Research also suggests that global events – and social change – influence the representations of crime, victim/survivors, and perpetrators (Meyers, 1997). Following this insight, this paper examines how Canadian news media report on sexual violence in the age of #MeToo, which has been hailed as a “revolution” (Chandra & Erlingsdóttir, 2021, p. 13) for bringing unparalleled attention to the topic.

Critical feminist scholarship on media coverage of sexual assault has shown that news perpetuates rape myths through patriarchal portrayals that focus on the behaviour, lifestyle, and credibility of the victim/survivor (Dwyer et al., 2012; Easta et al., 2015). Studies reveal that media representations focus on the ‘moral character’ and ‘reputation’ of the victim/survivor (Loś & Chamard, 1997), approach her with disbelief (Franiuk et al., 2008) and favour the perpetrator (Aroustamian, 2020). Studies also show that sexual assault is sensationalized in the media through stereotypical depictions of those involved (Benedict, 1992). O’Hara (2012) finds that the news media portray rapists as “devious monsters” and victim/survivors either as “virgins attacked by these monsters or, contrastingly, as promiscuous women who invited the rape and are therefore to blame” (p. 248). These portrayals are not only replete with gender

biases, but are intersectionally differentiated by distinct dimensions of inequality, such as race and ethnicity (Gagné et al., 2020; Jeanis & Powers, 2017; Slakoff & Fradella, 2019), class (Wood, 2024), and sexual orientation (Morrison et al., 2020). In fact, extensive research has documented the ubiquity and persistence of colonial settler narratives in contemporary Canadian media, which has been a major site for the (mis)representation of Indigenous women as those pursuing “a high-risk lifestyle” and therefore less credible and less (news)worthy (Gilchrist, 2010; Strega et al., 2014). For example, Gilchrist (2010) found that the Canadian media is 3.5 times less likely to report on missing and murdered Indigenous women as compared to missing and murdered white women and that the existing media reports are considerably shorter, less detailed, and less intimate than those on missing and murdered white women. Several scholars interpreted such media apathy through the lenses of “gendered disposability” (Razack, 2016) and the symbolic annihilation of Indigenous women and argued that this practice “further entrench[ed] their marginalization in Canadian society” (Gilchrist, 2010, p. 385) especially given the disproportionate rates of sexual victimization among Indigenous women (Heidinger, 2022).

Moreover, prior scholarship has established that misperceptions about sexual violence are reproduced through highly selective coverage. For example, in their study on sexual assault coverage in Canadian newspapers, Loś and Chamard (1997) found that cases of stranger rapes received greater attention than cases in which the victim/survivor knew the perpetrator, although the latter constitutes a majority (74 percent) of police-reported sexual assault (Conroy, 2024). Similarly, existing research has shown that the media disproportionately cover unusual cases in which the accusation had been falsified (Benedict, 1992). Together, such representations contribute to the portrayal of sexual violence as a rare occurrence, rather than a widespread problem stemming from the broader context of gender inequality; they also promote rape myth acceptance. Highlighting the effects of sexual assault depictions in print media, Franiuk and colleagues (2008) found that those exposed to myth-endorsing articles were more likely to distrust the victim/survivor and side with the defendant. This finding supports the notion that endorsement of rape myths is positively associated with negative assessments of victim/survivors, and lesser punishment for perpetrators (Finch & Munro, 2005; for a review, see Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994).

Interestingly, however, recent research is much less conclusive. While some studies suggest that victim-blaming has become less pronounced in the news (Blumell & Mulupi, 2021; Royal, 2019), others contend that neoliberal notions of risk and responsabilization are increasingly incorporated into narratives about agency and

victimization in cases of gender-based violence (Barca, 2018). Such narratives continue to focus on victim/survivor behaviour, “limiting subsequent discussions about prevention to what women can do to enhance their safety rather than identifying objectives for social and legal reform” (Gjika, 2020). It is these debates that motivate this research, which explores how Canadian news media represent sexual violence in the era of #MeToo. Given that media depictions of social problems tend to shift with broader cultural changes (Loseke & Best, 2003), this paper examines whether and to what extent recent media representations on sexual violence reflect and communicate feminist insights reaffirmed by the #MeToo movement.

#MeToo has been seen as a “critical incident” in journalism, which, as an industry, has been involved in a “reconsideration, rearticulation, [and] reinforcement of boundaries, either through new legislation or revised ethical standards” (Møller Hartley & Askanius, 2022, p. 35). In Canada, #MeToo prompted an outpouring of stories of sexual assault, increased reporting, and several high-profile cases. It also spurred responses ranging from marches to journalistic initiatives, such as *The Globe and Mail*’s “Unfounded” series, which revealed exceptionally high rates of sexual assault cases being classified as baseless by the police (Doolittle et al., 2017). Notably, the movement directly influenced public opinion (Earnscliffe, 2019) and public policy regarding the issue of sexual harassment and was even mentioned in the 2018 federal budget. However, despite the role that #MeToo played as “a catalyst for much private and public dialogue on [sexual violence]” (Conroy, 2024), research on its effects on news media remains relatively sparse. This paper aims to address this gap in the literature by examining media coverage of sexual assault during and in the immediate years following #MeToo.

As previously mentioned, although there has been increased recognition of sexual violence as a widespread social problem, the patterns in media coverage remain uneven. On the one hand, feminist perspectives that understand sexual violence as rooted in power imbalances, specifically gender inequalities, and problematize the institutional failures in supporting victim/survivors have gained greater visibility in news media. On the other hand, news coverage remains fraught with sympathetic portrayals of perpetrators, skepticism toward victim/survivors, and a reluctance to contextualize sexual violence within broader gender norms and inequities. Overall, our analysis suggests that while feminist insights — about the nature, workings, and effects of sexual violence — have made their way into mainstream news discourse, their integration is limited, inconsistent, and precarious. This argument advances current debates on the possibilities and limits of news media to effectively address sexual violence, its roots and adverse consequences.

Methodology

Our analysis draws on critical media, gender studies, and thematic analysis (TA), which is “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). TA, a research tool that is conducive to an accessible, yet refined, account of data, allows researchers to enjoy considerable freedom to use their preferred theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2016, p. 478), which was feminist theory in our case. Feminist perspectives and scholarship on media and sexual violence inform our analysis in two ways. First, we situate our study with the broader field of feminist media studies that engages with questions of representation, inclusion, and social justice from an intersectional lens. Accordingly, we see “the analysis of the media as part of the broader feminist project to challenge and change gendered inequalities in the social world” (Boyle & Berridge, 2023, p. 15) and apply insights from earlier work by feminist scholars who studied the media’s role in obscuring the reasons for, and experiences of, gender-based violence, particularly sexual assault.

Second, feminist epistemology guides our perspective in this study. Feminist scholars have long challenged the myth of objectivity in journalism, arguing that it masks the subjective biases and viewpoints of journalists, often privileging dominant viewpoints and perpetuating existing power structures (for a recent collection on reporting on #MeToo, see Baker & Rodrigues, 2022). More recently, feminist approaches to media have been vocal with their critique of traditional journalistic ethics such as demonstrating impartiality and avoiding activism and have increasingly been calling for an ethical and inclusive journalism that actively seeks out and incorporates diverse, and historically marginalized, voices and stances. In the context of reporting on sexual violence, “feminism has been continuously belittled, delegitimized, and de-politicized in mainstream news” (Mendes, 2011, cited in De Benedictis et al., 2019, p. 5). Remarkably, research shows that news reporting on sexual assault has been reluctant to change in the face of feminist critique (Cuklanz, 1996; Kitzinger, 2004). With this, our research question stems from the key finding that the news media are a key site where gendered discourses about sexual violence, more specifically, rape myths are constructed, primed, and reinforced (Franiuk et al., 2008). In this study, we aim to capture media representations of sexual violence in the context of its re-emergence as a major topic in the era of #MeToo.

Data Collection, Sample, and Procedure

We derived our sample of media stories from two Canadian newspapers with the largest total daily circulation (AgilityPR, 2025; Muck Rack 2025) — *The Toronto Star* (TS)

and *The Globe and Mail* (GM). Although readership estimates vary depending on the source, the most recent data indicate that each newspaper reaches approximately 2 to 2.5 million readers weekly across both print and digital platforms (The Globe and Mail, 2024). The TS is described as “the most popular newspaper based on weekly publications” and is known for its left-leaning editorial stance (MediaBiasFactCheck 2024a). In contrast, the GM, is often regarded as Canada’s “newspaper of record” catering to a more ‘sophisticated’ readership than the TS (Duignan, 2009); and is typically classified as centrist or right-leaning (MediaBiasFactCheck 2024b). While political stance was not a criterion for newspaper selection, we consider it a strength that the TS and GM are politically divergent, given the influence of ideological bias on how news media frame socially controversial issues.

We collected digital editions of the newspaper articles through the Canadian Newsstream database for articles published between October 2017 and April 2024. We retrieved articles by searching with the key terms “rape”, “sexual assault”, and/or “sexual violence” and included all types of news written in English. The initial database search yielded 929 articles. After filtering out shorter news pieces and texts that mentioned sexual violence only in passing, the final dataset consisted of 814 articles. To create a manageable sample, we used systematic random sampling, selecting the first article at random and then selected every fifth article from the list. This approach ensured a structured selection process and resulted in a representative sample of 162 articles, including opinion pieces, editorials, and news stories.

Analysis

We analyzed our data using a reflexive TA, which focuses on locating accounts within the broader sociocultural context (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytic procedures of TA encourage full immersion in the dataset, which refers to actively reading and re-reading the data to first develop codes and then organize these into themes. To this end, both authors read the articles twice — once during data collection to get a general idea of the dataset and ensure eligibility for inclusion, and once more to note down initial ideas and significant observations. Our analysis employs both inductive and deductive approaches. Since the primary aim was to examine the current trends in news coverage of sexual assault, we identified the main finding of research on media reporting of sexual violence as our deductive theme (i.e., *persistence of rape myths*). Other themes are data-driven and were identified through the research process. The combination of deductive and inductive strategies has allowed for a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of news coverage as necessitated by the research question.

We followed a two-phased process for coding. First, as co-authors, we independently read and coded the articles on spreadsheets by transcribing relevant parts of articles and taking detailed notes on all cases. Following the initial coding, we consulted to identify patterns pertaining to the reporting of sexual assault. Through data familiarization, we identified multiple points of potential analytic interest and created a codebook to help ensure intercoder reliability. Second, we moved onto NVivo to conduct a final analytical reading of the articles and refined our themes. Eventually, we identified four inductive themes: *who speaks (up)?*, *feminist commentary and critique*, *it's all about culture*, and *sexual violence as trauma*. These themes were selected by salience and importance to addressing the research question, and hence all apply meaningfully to the analytical sample.

Braun and Clarke (2019) encourage researchers to adopt reflexivity, subjectivity and creativity as resources in knowledge production (p. 591). Aligned with this perspective, we identified collaborative feminist reflexivity (Linabary et al., 2021) early in the project as central to both to our methodology and broader research praxis. As two cisgender, heterosexual women, of different social and racial backgrounds, career stages, and in a mentor-student relationship, we shared a deep commitment to understanding the contemporary media representations of sexual violence and addressing issues of power and gender inequalities and we agreed that we needed to be intentional with our practices to be able to fully incorporate feminist reflexivity into our research. To support this, we engaged in collaborative reflexive journaling not only to track daily research activities or ideas, but also to document the methodological decisions we made, underlying rationales, as well as our reflections on the critical questions we faced during key points of the research.

In addition, we concurrently read relevant literature and actively searched for and interpreted contradictory evidence (Miles et al., 2014). The weekly meetings, co-created notes, and countless conversations, musings, and brainstorming sessions fostered the dialogue between the two of us, leading to productive exchanges of ideas and insight; they also ensured mutual accountability to promote transparency, rigor, and trustworthiness (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Nowell et al., 2017) in our analysis. Equally important, we embraced the strengths of collaboration by constructively challenging each other's assumptions and applying consensus coding to establish validity. Our commitment to research triangulation, peer debriefing, and sustained reflexivity strengthened all stages of the project, from analysis to writing.

Findings and Discussion

Persistence of Rape Myths

Our first theme *persistence of rape myths* allows us to examine whether, and to what extent, news media continue to affirm “prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists” (Burt, 1980) in the era of #MeToo. Rape myths are part of a broader phenomenon often referred to as rape culture, “a complex set of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and supports violence against women” (Buchwald et al., 1993, p. vii), also impacting men and nonbinary persons (Buchwald et al., 2005). Rape culture is upheld through repeated circulation of myths such as “victims are asking for it,” “victims readily false report rape” and “‘real rape’ happens when an armed stranger attacks a woman who physically resists and is physically injured” (Payne et al., 1999). Our analysis suggests that, despite the undeniable impact of #MeToo in public discussions on sexual violence, news coverage remains a site where certain rape myths persist in more subtle, but equally powerful, ways.

One common rape myth is that victims, particularly women, routinely make false accusations about sexual assault. Our findings show that this myth of the lying victim, long perpetuated in the media through rare but highly publicized cases of inaccurate reporting (Longsway & Fitzgerald, 1994), continues to persist in news coverage. The language used in the media often casts doubt on victims’ credibility, and this pattern remains evident in our analysis. For instance, the term ‘allege’ and its derivatives (e.g., alleged, allegedly, alleging) appear 525 times across 106 articles, while words like ‘accuse’ and its variations (e.g., accused, accusation(s), accusing) are used 240 times across 72 articles. These recurring language choices are noteworthy, as they shift the focus away from the victims’ experiences and implicitly, but emphatically, undermine the credibility of their experiences.

Moreover, a significant number of articles portray offenders in a ‘positive’ light, featuring their successful careers and highlighting their credentials and accomplishments. For example, an article reporting sexual assault charges against a doctor describes him as “a top pain specialist during his four decades at Toronto’s Mount Sinai Hospital” (Howlett & Grant, 2022).³ Similarly, another article covering the resignation of “prominent” entertainment leaders facing sexual assault “allegations” refers to the accused as “[t]wo of the biggest stars of the Canadian entertainment industry” (Perreux, 2017a). Another article highlighting “allegations” against Cristiano

³ We have included the most up-to-date articles available at the time of our manuscript submission in July 2025. Please note that article titles and content may be updated and/or renamed by news outlets over time.

Ronaldo notes he is “one of the wealthiest and most famous soccer players in the world” (Harris, 2018). This positive, if not laudatory language, is problematic, as it implicitly bolsters the socio-economic status – and the credibility of perpetrators, which work in tandem to create an image of social and moral superiority, given the belief that high-status individuals are less likely to commit crimes like sexual assault (Gleason & Harris, 1975; Knight et al., 2001). Such an image placed on perpetrators further undermines the trustworthiness of victim/survivors and calls their experiences into question.

In addition to speaking highly of perpetrators, news articles also extensively cover high-profile cases involving celebrities or public figures. This selective focus is often driven by media outlets’ strategies to boost readership as these cases tend to captivate greater public attention (Chancer, 2005). For example, across our data set, cases involving Hockey Canada are referenced 187 times, and the trial of Harvey Weinstein is referenced 132 times. The over-representation of high-profile cases has a direct impact on what receives media attention – and what does not – resulting in a lack of coverage on more ordinary, yet equally important, cases. This unequal attention risks downplaying the fact that sexual violence is a widespread issue, transcending any particular, ‘niche,’ and ‘high-profile’ contexts or settings, such as corporate events, film sets, and professional sports leagues and organizations, attended by those who enjoy racial and class privileges.

Interestingly, if not paradoxically, we also found evidence that the media is increasingly and openly critical of “overt” sexism and victim-blaming (Swim & Cohen, 1997). Our analysis suggests that the myth of the perfect victim is no longer as stated outright or directly mobilized. To the contrary, recent articles recognize rape myths as problematic and harmful, and critique them as such. For example, the article titled “Our Justice System Is Still Burdened by Rape Mythologies” condemns the legal system’s reliance on rape myths by discussing how defence lawyers continue to use stereotypes, Crown attorneys failing to challenge the use of rape myths, and judges being insufficiently educated about the impact of gender-based assumptions on how we think about sex and intimacy (Craig, 2018). Similarly, another article emphasizes the need to hold judges accountable for their problematic perceptions regarding sexual assault. The article quotes a judge who made troubling comments about a young victim, saying, “[s]he’s a young girl, 17. Maybe she’s a little overweight but she has a pretty face, no?” and further described her as “a bit flattered” and possibly enjoying the attention (Perreux, 2017b). Both articles illustrate how today’s media acknowledges the harm of relying on overt rape myths and calling for accountability within the justice system, which is a remarkable improvement, especially in light of the

changing cultural landscape on sexual violence. Overall, our findings indicate that while overt rape myths may be less prevalent today, subtle forms persist. Though less blatant, examining such portrayals is extremely important. If left unexamined, the news media may shape inaccurate and stereotyped perceptions of victim-survivors, influencing how the public views and understands sexual violence.

Who Speaks (up)?

Our second theme *who speaks (up)?* explores whose voices are heard, whose accounts are prioritized, and who is left out of dominant narratives – questions that are deeply intertwined with how meaning is constructed in the media. In fact, one of the major tenets of social constructionism is that no specific condition has a fixed, singular meaning; rather, how a situation is defined changes over time (Loseke & Best, 2003). Sexual violence is no exception. Indeed, “who decides ‘what counts’ as [sexual] victimization and who defines its meaning and seriousness” (Kelly & Radford, 1998, p. 71) remains a question of controversy. Accordingly, whose perspectives are included and whose are marginalized within news media, which are a key ‘public arena’ (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988) where a social problem ‘rises’ and ‘falls,’ is deeply consequential.

Historically, the news media relied extensively on political and criminal justice officials when relaying crime stories (Barak, 2007; Chermak, 1994; Welch et al., 1997). In coverage of sexual assault, the reliance on law enforcement worked to the detriment of other claims-makers and fed misconceptions about both the causes of sexual violence and its victim/survivors and perpetrators (Easteal et al., 2015; Franiuk et al., 2008; O’Hara, 2012). Furthermore, the role of gender in sexual violence has largely been ignored in media accounts. Our analysis suggests that this is beginning to change. Below we argue that the types of people who are quoted, cited, and/or directly included in news on sexual violence are considerably more varied than before and include, in addition to *law & order*, *organizational representatives*, *researchers & advocates*, and *victim/survivors*.

Law & Order

Consistent with previous research (Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013), *law & order* has been the most prevalent ‘voice of authority’ in news coverage on sexual violence. In our analysis, we have combined criminal justice practitioners and government officials due to their roles as “state managers” (Welch et al., 1998). Indeed, as the primary definers of crime (Chermak, 1994; Sigal, 1973), *law & order* officials adopt a just-the-facts

approach, which promotes a conservative crime control agenda. This approach is evident in the following examples.

“We have a predator on the loose who is attacking women from behind. [We] don’t know what his motive is, considering that some of these occurrences may start with a robbery and end with a sexual assault, or vice versa.” The most recent incident occurred Thursday at about 9:25 p.m., when a 30-year-old woman was followed by a man near 31 Four Winds Dr., close to Finch Ave. W. and Sentinel Rd. The man threatened her with a knife, stole her cellphone and sexually assaulted her, police said (Marotta & Asadullah, 2018).

According to police, the suspect was wearing a black toque, black jacket, grey track pants, black running shoes, and carrying a large black food delivery bag. Police say the suspect and victim did not know each other (Lamba, 2024).

These quotes illustrate what Bullock and Cubert call a “police frame” (2002, p. 490) describing the emphasis on “factual, unattributed information and on information from official sources” (Bullock, 2007, p. 46). Such coverage routinely reinforces the dominant narrative on sexual violence as a rare crime that is typically perpetrated by a stranger.

Recent articles that prioritize *law & order* narratives, especially those by higher-level government officials and legal professionals, deserve particular attention as, we argue, are more diverse in their perspectives about sexual violence, including how it should be responded to by the authorities, that are typically suggested. For example, in an article, Attorney General Doug Downey is asked a question about the funding for Ontario’s sexual assault centres, and he responds by saying that the government “is supporting victims across the province” and “the families who are on the wrong end of crime.” He adds: “We take [service provision for victims of sexual assault] seriously. These are some of the most vulnerable in our province ... We need to be there in a meaningful way to deliver the services they need most, when they need it the most” (Rushowy, 2020). Similarly, Justice Minister David Lametti’s support for a bill requiring sexual-assault education for judges highlights a more critical approach in official statements:

the training aspect of the bill is aimed at providing judges with insight into “myths and stereotypes” that surround sexual-assault cases. The training in social context would provide judges who preside over sexual assault cases with

“deeper insights and best practices to help them better navigate the social and cultural factors” (Dickson, 2020a).

While both of these quotes might be viewed as ‘image statements’ in the times of #MeToo, they are notable given that they recognize sexual violence as a large-scale problem that can only be effectively addressed with structural and institutional change that requires government support. Overall, even though accounts by *law & order* continue to dominate the discourse on sexual violence in news media, we argue that they are not as uniform nor consistent as they used to be.

Organizational Representatives

Since the #MeToo movement began, there has been an increased emphasis on the need for institutional reforms. Indeed, government agencies and high-profile organizations have repeatedly acknowledged the inadequacy of existing sexual assault and harassment policies. Yet, this acknowledgment has been largely absent from news coverage. Our analysis includes several articles that report on organizational spokespersons, who are most concerned with preserving organizational reputation. Undeniably, the vagueness, rhetoric of ‘objectivity, and lack of accountability in these statements are particularly notable:

Juventus strongly backed its most expensive star in a Twitter statement: ‘Cristiano Ronaldo has shown in recent months his great professionalism and dedication, which is appreciated by everyone at Juventus,’ the Italian league champions said. ‘The events allegedly dating back to almost 10 years ago do not change this opinion, which is shared by anyone who has come into contact with this great champion’ (Harris, 2018).

A spokesperson for St. Michael’s [a private high school in Toronto] said Thursday that the school has no comment but confirmed that the athletic director and football coaches remain on staff (Hayes, 2019).

The reporting on these statements is uncritical, presenting them as neutral without contextualizing them in broader discussions about sexual violence in institutional settings or providing the details of each case. This approach once again emphasizes the perspective of powerful institutions and individuals, often failing to hold anyone or any entity accountable for their actions.

Researchers & Advocates

The second most common group that was quoted and/or cited in articles on sexual violence is *researchers & advocates*. This finding challenges previous research that found that experts such scholars, activists, or service providers did not appear as sources in news coverage of violence against women (Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013, p. 162). The following quotes illustrate the many ways that sexual violence is discussed by *researchers & advocates*. Although these narratives are not homogeneous, they share a common understanding of sexual violence as a systemic issue, rooted in gendered power inequalities, and particularly women's subordination. The quotes are also typical in terms of their emphasis on the role of patriarchal institutions in sexual victimization, the challenges that victim/survivors face when navigating institutional processes, and how they can be mitigated.

"Most sexual assault survivors don't want to report to the police, for a myriad of very valid reasons and the more marginalized someone is by society, the less likely they are interested in reporting," said Tracy Porteous, the executive director of Ending Violence Association of B.C. (Smith, 2017).

[C]riminologist Holly Johnson has conducted some of the most extensive research in the country into how sexual violence cases move — or don't move — through the criminal-justice system. ... What we need to see is a change in charging. So, until we see that, we can't claim this is a success. ... [The Philadelphia] Model should deliver a higher charge rate, not just reclassification, and it also should deliver better investigations, more thorough investigations (Doolittle, 2017).

"Even for very financially secure women in Hollywood who made disclosures, there were attendant risks for them and that kept people silent for a very long time," said Janet Mosher, an associate professor at Osgoode Hall Law School who researches gender-based violence. "For any number of other women, the risks are much more significant" (Bielski, 2019).

The finding that *researchers & advocates* appear and speak in news media in a way that has never been seen before, advancing their own viewpoints, is significant not only for its potential to influence policy and law reform, but also for its discursive impact. Certainly, the contribution that *researchers & advocates* make to public

narratives on violence against women is noteworthy for promoting a feminist construction of sexual violence, which we explore in our next theme.

Victim/survivors

First and foremost, MeToo has been a collective form of speak-out with its key actors being the *victim/survivors* themselves. While debates on the possibilities and limits of ‘speaking up’ are ongoing among feminists (Alcoff & Gray, 1993; Boyle, 2019; Serisier, 2018), there is widespread consensus that victim/survivors of sexual violence – traditionally seen as “unreliable narrators and testifiers” (Kay, 2023, p. 195) – wield such a powerful voice, now more than ever, and challenge public discourses on sexual violence (Palmer-Mehta, 2018). While the prevalence of such narratives is a major indicator of the increased centrality of public survivors to the cultural debate about sexual violence (Serisier, 2023), our analysis shows that the news media have increasingly become an arena where victim/survivors actively share their perspectives, which have long been devalued, if not fully dismissed. The quotes below reveal the barriers that victim/survivors face when seeking compensation and justice for the harm they have suffered, their disappointment with institutional processes, and the complexity of their experiences, which go beyond a commonplace “she said, he said” depiction.

“I honestly have no words to describe the rage I feel about it,” she said, after learning that the charges had been withdrawn. It’s horrifying that this is the way victims are treated. I wish I never came forward. It has brought nothing but additional pain (Howlett & Grant, 2022).

I was raped in my apartment, and it was because I would not accept this guy as a client. Did I call the cops? Nope, because I know what would have happened: ‘Are you sure you were raped? Are you sure it wasn’t a client that just didn’t pay you?’ (Dickson, 2020b).

This is what it looks like when institutions create a culture where a predator can flourish unafraid and unabated and this is what it looks like when people in authority refuse to listen, put friendships in front of the truth, fail to create or enforce proper policy and fail to hold enablers accountable (Renzetti, 2018).

Above all, these quotes show how *victim/survivors* use the media as a vehicle to share their own accounts of their experiences and to be heard. In doing so, they vigorously

speak out against perpetrators and ‘the system’ that has failed all who suffered sexual violence for too long, holding them accountable. While we believe that this is an important step for victim/survivors to finally bypass the role of “the expert mediator” (Alcoff & Gray, 1993, p. 260) and to reach what Palmer-Mehta (2018) calls the transgressive and subversive potential of survivor discourse, the news accounts we examined remain largely limited to the experiences of young, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, and socioeconomically advantaged women. This framing continues to exclude the voices and perspectives of gender, sexual, and racial minorities, who have historically been at higher risk of sexual victimization. This finding aligns with the literature on journalism reportage of sexual violence during #MeToo, which has problematized the underrepresentation of marginalized communities, such as LGBTIQ+ individuals (Ison, 2019), women with disabilities (Gieseler, 2022), and older women (Gilmore, 2018).

Feminist Commentary & Critique

One direct outcome of the inclusion of more varied voices, particularly, *researchers & advocates* and *victim/survivors*, within news on sexual violence is the shift in the tone of reporting. Our third theme *feminist commentary & critique* suggests that feminist understandings of sexual violence are more present in the media than ever. In fact, an important number of recent articles understand sexual violence through the lenses of gender and power dynamics and recognize it as a systemic issue. Specifically, these articles engage in a feminist analysis of sexual violence, explicitly acknowledging that inconsistent, ineffective, and harmful legal responses fail victim/survivors, leading to ‘secondary victimization’ (Campbell & Raja, 1999; Martin, 2005). The following excerpts are typical of the disappointment and frustration that victim/survivors experience in their search for justice in the legal system.

An article reporting a sexual assault case that ended abruptly due to the expiration of limitation period, caused by logistical delays, notes that “[t]he trial would not continue; there would be no verdict for the accused, and no sense of justice for [her],” and continues: “[the victim/survivor] has been left devastated and confused, disillusioned with the criminal justice system and furious with the province for failing to adequately staff the new courthouse.” The article, which was titled “I was silenced again,” then quotes the victim/survivor, who expresses her resentment of “the system:” “Previously, I would have said 100 per cent go ahead with it, your voice matters, and you deserve to be heard, and now ... The pain that I feel could have and should have been prevented, and I don’t want anybody else to ever experience that. People need to realize this is what the system looks like and it’s not OK” (Gallant, 2023).

Similarly, another article that focuses on the victim/survivor's experience highlights the ways in which sexual violence is not effectively nor promptly processed in the criminal justice system: "[The victim] had to relive the most traumatic and humiliating moments of her life over and over in front of a crowd of strangers and the man who assaulted her." The article extensively quotes the victim/survivor who says that "the trial was one of the most difficult things [she has] had to sit through. Not because the questions were difficult. ... It was difficult because it was part two of the trauma [she has] endured." The article continues to quote the victim/survivor who was "re-victimized by questions intended to pick apart [her] character and [her] integrity" and her concluding remarks, "no one should ever have to endure the cruelty [she] faced in this courtroom. The justice system is not built for survivors" (Hasham, 2022).

The insight that legal processes continue to silence, subordinate, and isolate victims of sexual violence has been fundamental to contemporary feminist critiques of the law (Corrigan, 2013; Spohn & Tellis, 2012). Given the key role that news media play in educating policy makers about social issues and stimulating public support for policy reform (Walsh-Childers, 1994), its acknowledgment of the problems in the criminal justice system is eminent. Equally noteworthy is the fact that *victims/survivors* are not the only ones contributing to such feminist commentary. As a matter of fact, several articles included perspectives from scholars, advocates, and other experts on sexual violence and particularly their views on institutional shortcomings to properly address sexual assault complaints in an approving tone. These shortcomings range from "insufficient responses to predators within their ranks" and "failure to report information to police," to work cultures "where predator[s] can flourish unafraid and unabated ... [because] people in authority refuse to listen, put friendships in front of the truth, fail to create or enforce proper policy, and fail to hold enablers accountable" (Haupt, 2021).

Additionally, a significant amount of news in our dataset raise the notion of impunity in cases of sexual assault. These accounts emphasize institutions' responsibility to encourage disclosures, protect victim/survivors by ensuring their access to meaningful support, and create a climate of accountability. In an article discussing women's distrust of "the system" to effectively respond to sexual assault complaints, the CEO of Plan International Canada, a non-profit organization specialized in children's rights and equality for girls, underscores the impact of #MeToo, which "expose[d] hundreds of powerful men, challenging the very systems that allowed their behaviour to go undetected and unreported for so long" on recent public discussions, and adds:

[A]ll too often, perpetrators carry on. They build their own narratives to justify or detract from their actions. They don't feel shock[ed] and numb in the aftermath. They don't grapple with loss of control or struggle to regain a sense of self after acute violation. Perpetrators don't feel the fear. They don't feel the guilt, blame and vulnerability. They don't experience the overwhelming sense of isolation and distrust. Often with the backing of powerful networks, they move on with their lives. This needs to change. We know survivors don't trust the systems that are designed to keep them safe. With good reason — we are showing them that despite the progress we've made in listening to their stories, in many cases there are no long-term ramifications for their abusers (Riseboro, 2019).

Finally, she concludes by saying that “[t]ogether, we can disrupt the system that normalizes various forms of sexual misconduct *to hold perpetrators accountable* for their actions. This is *a fundamental step toward gender equality*. This should be our new normal. We shouldn't have to wait for another reckoning. *Accountability needs to start now*” (emphasis added).

Similarly, in other examples, the call for individual and institutional accountability is paired with a discussion of sexual violence as a power-and-control issue, one that is deeply gendered maintaining power asymmetries. These articles also discuss the significance of the institutional context in impeding, or fostering, sexual assault. The following excerpt, which quotes Kyle Shewfelt, a former Canadian gymnast, is not unusual in its demand for accountability within an organization and its active call for reforms to address the factors that contribute to instances of sexual violence within the sport. The excerpt reads:

Shewfelt says, as a competitor, he witnessed power imbalances in which coaches demeaned or ignored athletes as a way to motivate them, or the athlete was too dependent on the coach for validation. “Those environments were created on power and not on mutual respect,” Shewfelt said. “Environments built on the power of the coach and the athlete being the subordinate. He says his gym’s staff must complete a Respect in Sport program and undergo mandatory police and reference checks. ... “Trust is something, you don’t just get it. It’s something that’s earned. It’s earned through creating environments that foster it” (Spencer, 2019).

Overall, *feminist commentary & critique* expands public debates on sexual violence by examining its gendered socio-political context and the key role institutions play in ensuring fair and compassionate treatment of victim/survivors who seek recognition and justice. Given the public scrutiny that traditionally male-dominated institutions, such as the police, the military, and professional sports, have recently faced and the increased recognition of inconsistencies in law and policy regarding sexual assault, the opportunity to reflect on these debates has never been more attainable than it is today.

It's All About Culture

Our fourth theme *it's all about culture* captures the ways in which news media attribute sexual violence to culture. On the one hand, this attribution can be seen as progress on the part of the media to present sexual violence as a systemic issue with structural dimensions and therefore not an individual problem. On the other hand, it implicitly falls short of viewing and analyzing sexual violence in relation to gender, its norms and inequalities.

To illustrate, an article covering a case of sexual assault at Western University carries the headline “We Clearly Have a Culture Problem.” In the article, President Shepard acknowledges institutional failures in addressing sexual assault on campus, and states: “[w]hat happened last week is really unacceptable” and adds that they “have a culture problem that [they] need to address” (Friesen & Mahood, 2021). However, he does not elaborate on what this “culture problem” exactly entails, leaving the factors that cause and sustain sexual violence unexplored and inexplicably vague. This vagueness reflects a broader trend in media reporting, namely the emphasis on “culture” as a catch-all explanation, which unwittingly masks the underlying gendered causes and consequences of sexual violence — particularly in institutional contexts such as sports, politics, and media, where cultural norms and practices often normalize such violence.

Similarly, an article about ‘Hockey Canada sexual assault scandal’, as is often referred to in the media, that was originally titled “Changing Hockey Culture” locates the source and the solution of sexual assault within “sport culture” without attempting to unpack the gendered power dynamics that underpin it. The article highlights the role of #MeToo in raising public awareness of sexual violence, while highlighting the need to “end the culture of silence that protects and enables perpetrators.” Yet, the explanation that it offers, namely changing the “culture of our sport”—remains largely nebulous (“Sexual assault turns a spotlight”, 2022). By attributing systemic issues to “sports culture” without clearly defining or dissecting what that culture entails, the media misses the opportunity to address critical questions about gendered power

imbalances, entrenched masculinities, and the broader structures that sustain these harms.

Notably, the tendency to use “culture” as an overarching explanation extends to other contexts. For example, an article addressing the prevalence of “sexual misconduct” on Parliament Hill describes it as the product of a “truly toxic culture” that fosters and exacerbates perpetrators (Turnbull, 2018). Here again, “culture” is employed as shorthand for an explanation of sexual violence. Yet, the discussion lacks depth and nuance. Distinctly, the structural and systemic forces—including hierarchical power relations and gendered inequalities—that create and sustain such environments remain unexamined.

Fundamentally, what we problematize here is rooted in larger debates about the concept of culture, particularly its definition and usage, which often remain elusive. Scholars argue that “while the concept is probably indispensable, it cannot be defined definitively” (Jahoda, 2012). Tylor’s widely cited definition — “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man [sic] as a member of society” (Spencer-Oatey, 2012, p. 1) — captures the breadth of the term while noting a familiar challenge: its inclusivity risks overgeneralization and oversimplification. Indeed, we argue that even as public recognition of sexual violence grows, the media still fail to identify – or at least fail to name or address – entrenched gender hierarchies, male dominance, and sexism as major structural factors that perpetuate it. By not discussing sexual violence as a deeply gendered phenomenon that it is, media narratives constrain our understanding of the issue, limiting the potential for meaningful solutions that address the underlying power dynamics and inequalities at play. Evidently, it is about a lot more than just culture.

Sexual Violence as Trauma

Our final theme, *sexual violence as trauma*, centres on the descriptions of sexual violence in the news media as a profoundly painful and distressing experience. Media narratives of sexual violence have consistently downplayed, if not outright dismissed, the harm that it inflicts on victim/survivors and the severity of its consequences, which range from emotional difficulties such as anxiety, depression, and shame to financial losses (Boyd, 2011; Easteal, 1994; Taylor, 2021). The myth that “rape is a trivial event” (Payne et al., 1999, p. 36) and is “not a big deal” has been perpetuated in media through the use of a vague and sensationalist language (Cripps, 2021) and the implication that the impact of rape has been exaggerated by feminists and victims/survivors for sympathy and political traction (Edwards et al., 2011; Harding, 2015). This myth assumes that rape in particular, and sexual assault more generally, is

not ‘that serious,’ or ‘that disturbing,’ ultimately invalidating victim/survivors’ horrific experiences. Within this context of the historical dismissal of victim/survivors’ voices, *sexual violence as trauma* – the fact that sexual violence is deeply traumatic, with severe and long-lasting negative repercussions – appears as a powerful theme in media discourses.

In an article about a sexual assault case in Edmonton, the victim/survivor states: “For years I have been terrified of you. You *haunted my dreams* and dictated my waking moments.” She continues: “I am not to blame. I did not ask for this. I am given no relief from *the trauma you caused me*, and I will give you no more of my life from this day forward. I am no longer a number. I am a victim.” The article notes that the victim/survivor “described the effects of the assault as being like ‘a toxic burn’” and that she “would never wish this pain on anyone,” “even [the offender]”. It then highlights “the catastrophic effects the assault has had” on the life of another victim, “including destroying relationships, derailing her work and school, and leaving her highly traumatized, and at times suicidal” (emphasis added; Pruden, 2020).

Another article reporting on a police-perpetrated sexual assault case focuses on the victim impact statement, in which the victim/survivor wrote that “she had been traumatized by the sexual assault as well as the court process” and added that she “was now medicated for depression and anxiety and often [felt] unsafe in her own home.” The article continues by noting how she “tried to take her own life by overdosing on pills and she had to move away from St. John’s” and ends by the judge’s words that “[n]o sentence could relieve the woman of her trauma or its repercussions” (Smellie, 2021).

These examples illustrate the media’s recognition of the deeply enduring effects of sexual violence, as revealed through the narratives of victim/survivors. While historically victim/survivors have not been considered as authoritative sources, news media appear to be more open to their voices and thus to recognizing the wounds of sexual violence. This phenomenon aligns with the observation that, in 21st century and particularly in the #MeToo era, victim/survivors are “more likely to be heard and granted the cultural authority to speak about their experiences of rape” (Serisier, 2018, p. 42) and can finally “seiz[e] the power to name [their] condition” (Palmer-Mehta, 2018, p. 173) however complex and even grim that condition may be. This finding corroborates recent work by Palmer-Mehta (2018), who examines “I’m No Longer Afraid,” which is an archive of testimonies by victim/survivors in a high-profile case. Palmer-Mehta (2018) argues that the archive “productively intervenes in dominant discourses by refashioning the expert mediator role and unleashing the subversive power of survivor speech” (p. 177), pointing to the potential for media to assist

victim/survivors in “register[ing] the horror” of their experiences of sexual violence, and “demand[ing] accountability” for the pain they have endured, and “placing [it] on the public record” (p. 168, 178).

In addition to depicting sexual violence itself as trauma, which, as a category, has recently been the benchmark of “true” victimhood (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009) – news stories also increasingly recognize, name, and acknowledge the harm, distress, or victimization that victim/survivors experience as they try to navigate the legal system (Campbell & Raja, 1999; Konradi, 2007; Martin, 2005) as trauma in and of itself. The following excerpts demonstrate the different ways that post-assault legal experiences are assessed as deeply distressing for victims/survivors in recent media.

In a news story about a Supreme Court decision that denied a St. John’s police officer’s appeal to potentially reverse his sexual assault conviction “ending a 10-year battle for criminal justice,” the victim’s lawyer is quoted saying that “her client is relieved [the process] is over, after a decade of being *retraumatized* through three trials, a preliminary inquiry, and numerous interviews by police in a criminal-justice system that is very difficult for survivors to navigate.” The lawyer adds that “so much of her life has been on hold while the criminal-justice system does its *torturous* thing” and although she is satisfied with the outcome, she is “really saddened by *how long it’s taking and how terribly, terribly difficult it was for her to have to endure*. (emphasis added; Jones, 2024).

Another story has a similar thread, namely sexual assault victims’ “traumatization” by court processes, and particularly the lengthy trials and the questioning that victims often remain subject to:

The trial was one of the most difficult things I have had to sit through. Not because the questions were difficult. It is not hard to tell the truth when you live through the memories of it every single day. It was difficult because it was part two of the trauma I have endured. [...] No one should ever have to endure the cruelty I faced in this courtroom. The justice system is not built for survivors (Hasham, 2022).

The article goes on to detail the specifics of the case, stating that the victim “was further traumatized by the court process” and “the endless pandemic delays” ... Then she had to relive the most traumatic and humiliating moments of her life over and over in front of a crowd of strangers and the man who assaulted her.”

Overall, there is an increasing recognition of sexual violence — including the way that it is dealt with by the criminal justice system — as trauma with life-altering consequences in recent news media. This is primarily the result of the inclusion of victim/survivor and legal and other experts on the topic in media narratives that increasingly prime the reader to receive these “narratives as sources of important knowledge and truth” (Palmer-Mehta, 2018, p. 167). As Higgins and Silver (1991) once said: “who gets to tell the story and whose story counts as ‘truth’ determine the definition of what rape is” and how it is experienced and managed (p. 1). Therefore, news accounts that prioritize the lived experiences of victim/survivors are unequivocally important because they have the potential to disrupt dominant discourses — those that have historically minimized the gravity of sexual offences and the ways it is treated and responded to by institutions. By doing so, these can reshape public understandings and promote alternative perspectives of it, and in this case, its implications.

Nevertheless, we remain ambivalent about this point due to inconsistencies in sexual violence reporting. One glaring observation stands out: even the articles that recognize the enduring consequences that sexual violence has for victim/survivors often fail to provide support service information. Notably, only 10 articles out of 162 include such information. This is underwhelming given the knowledge that use of victim services can have a significant positive impact for victim/survivors (Campbell, 2006; Westmarland & Alderson, 2013) and the important role of the media to raise awareness about available supports for victims of sexual violence (CRCVC, 2011).

Conclusions

Recently, a UN Women spokesperson commented that “[t]he world has changed because of the #MeToo movement” (Sen, 2021, p. 249). This comment was prompted by an analysis of Twitter that showed that the hashtag #MeToo was shared on the platform nearly a million times in only 48 hours, with impressions reaching 25 million times by December 2019, across continents and in different languages. The popularity of the hashtag speaks to the global character of #MeToo, which, as the study attests, “has genuinely been an international movement, across rich and poor, with both high and low gender equality ranking, where laws against sexual harassment exist and where they don’t” (Sen, 2021, p. 251). Certainly, it highlights its relevance in diverse national and cultural contexts, evidencing and reaffirming the ubiquity of sexual violence in women’s lives. Perhaps, what is most notable about #MeToo is its success in revealing the similarities, and differences, between the experiences of victim/survivors and linking sexual victimization to structures of gender inequality

across various institutional contexts. As Fileborn and Loney-Howes suggested, #MeToo generated a set of critical questions “regarding *who* is able to speak and be heard, *what* constitutes sexual violence, *whose* experiences are included and perceived as worthy of redress, and *how* activist communities go about the ‘business’ of generating change” (2019, p. 5).

Our study examined whether, and to what extent, mainstream news media reflect and address these discussions. Specifically, we analyzed how sexual violence has been reported and discussed in major Canadian newspapers during and in the aftermath of #MeToo, with a focus on the impact of increased debates on news coverage and representations. Our findings are mixed when it comes to the integration of feminist discourses on sexual violence into news media. On the one hand, news coverage remains a space where certain rape myths are subtly yet powerfully reinforced. Although victim-blaming seems to finally be diminishing in prevalence and strength, news articles tend to speak highly of perpetrators and cast doubt on the credibility of victim/survivors’ accounts. Moreover, echoing critiques raised against #MeToo for its white, heteronormative, and Western-centric focus (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019; Gilmore, 2018; Ison, 2019), the stories of white, cisgender, and affluent women and a handful of high-profile cases are overrepresented at the expense of other widespread, yet overlooked, cases. This finding aligns with other studies that pointed to the ongoing erasure of marginalized populations from the movement and the media’s continued failure to adopt an intersectional lens (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019) even in the era of #MeToo.

On the other hand, we also find that the news media are significantly more responsive to, and reflective of, feminist perspectives about the workings, and effects of sexual violence. Indeed, we found that news sources are more varied than they have ever been, including researchers, advocates, and victim-survivors, who have all traditionally been excluded from news coverage. A direct outcome of this openness to a relatively diverse set of voices is that sexual violence is increasingly discussed as a large-scale social problem that is rooted in entrenched gender inequalities. We see this as evidence of the media’s occasional, yet not insignificant, potential to embrace counternarratives and act as a site of feminist resistance and nuanced reporting (Kitzinger, 2004; Palmer-Mehta, 2018).

Furthermore, the #MeToo movement has unequivocally impacted mainstream news media, highlighting the ineffective legal responses to sexual violence, emphasizing accountability, and recognizing the profound long-lasting trauma experienced by victim/survivors. However, as we explain above, these patterns are neither consistent nor sufficiently comprehensive. This is particularly evident in

accounts that understand sexual violence as a societal and “cultural” issue but persistently fail to name, let alone address, the gendered roots, mechanisms, and dynamics of sexual violence. Yet, despite these limitations, journalism has proven capable of achieving forms of public accountability (Tong, 2022). A notable example is a recent court decision in a defamation lawsuit brought by choreographer Steve Bolton against La Presse. The court recognized that the investigation held by La Presse served the public interest and had been carried out with journalistic diligence (*Bolton c. La Presse ltée*, 2025). This case exemplifies the power of journalism to inform public opinion, elevate victim/survivor voices, and foster ethical and responsible media practices.

Overall, our findings show a paradoxical and precarious picture of progress marred by long-standing journalistic habits and practices that prioritize “objectivity.” As such, we are only cautiously optimistic. We believe that, given the importance of ethical reporting on social justice and the expanded efforts to reform media practices, especially in the area of sexual violence, as evidenced by the ever-increasing availability of editorial guidelines (e.g., Khan et al., 2023; Morrison & Dietzel, 2023), it has never been more timely to ask for news coverage that is not only informative, accurate, or reliable, but is also socially responsible, socially conscious, and (gender-)equitable. To this end, we suggest that future research explores comparative studies that aim to identify the cultural and structural factors that make media platforms, including news media, more amenable to entertaining, and to ideally engaging and addressing ideas, insights, and ‘awakenings’ mobilized by significant movements that seek justice, equality, and long-term social change.

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