



# Rape Myths in the Media Reporting of the Brett Kavanaugh Case

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### Methodology

The data set consists of 10 different online news articles. The news articles focus on the initial developments around Brett Kavanaugh's sexual assault accusations. All except 2 of the Kavanaugh articles are written in fall of 2018. All 10 online news articles come from five websites of prominent United States news sources. The five different news sources were chosen based on their ideological biases and reliability, as described by Ad Fontes Media. Ad Fontes Media (2019), a recognized online company that seeks to increase media literacy, has created a well-established Media Chart. I am using a case study approach to hegemonic masculinity and rape myths using the nationally reported sexual assault case of Brett Kavanaugh.

### Introduction

Rape myths are defined as the generalized and widely held beliefs about rape (Burt, 1980). When Brownmiller (1975) documented rape history and Burt (1980) expanded on this idea with rape myths, their general sentiments were that rape myths would continue to persist and dominate the discussions around rape. Several decades later, and in a new century, I wanted to examine how rape myths were persevering in mainstream media reporting by conducting a case study on the Brett Kavanaugh sexual assault allegations. Studying the pervasiveness or changes in rape myths is important. It provides insight into how rape myths are being perpetuated and helps us consider why certain rape myths have or have not changed. In an era when American women's voices are louder than ever before, we need to think about if the country is hearing us when we share our stories of rape and sexual assault.

### Theory

Hegemonic masculinity is one of the most well-known and impactful concepts of gender studies. In her work on *Masculinities* (1998), Connell suggests that there are several different masculinities that exist throughout time, culture, and individuals. The most preeminent masculinity is hegemonic masculinity, or the masculinity that legitimizes men's dominant position and role in society and views all other masculinities, women, and other marginalized groups as less than or subordinate. Again, hegemonic masculinity is not a "one-size fits all" as various factors contribute to the persistent and dominant masculinity in a culture. In addition to becoming more symbolic, the concept of hegemonic masculinity, and masculinities more generally, has shifted since the 1990s to account for the influence of race and class (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

### Literature Review

Rape myths, or generalized and widely held beliefs about rape, have powerful social implications (Brownmiller, 1975; Burt, 1980; Shen, 2011). The rape myths people hold trivialize a rape or claim that the rape did not happen, often adding to the traumatization a victim of rape faces. Burt (1980) proposes that there are different rape myths that permeate throughout culture. In broad categories, Burt's (1980) rape myths include victim blaming, such as accusing the victim of lying or claiming they were asking for it, excusing the perpetrator, and viewing the rape as natural. My study will build on Burt's rape myths by evidencing rape myths in current media reporting and expanding on how the rape myths may have changed since Burt's 1980 work.

### Findings

The preeminent rape myths found in the Kavanaugh case are questioning the credibility of the victim(s) and trivializing or belittling the allegations. Even though rape myths can still be found in the media reporting on Kavanaugh, a counter narrative seems to be developing around rape. For my analysis, I will refer to this counter narrative as an authentication narrative, as it offers validity, credibility, and legitimacy to the stories of the victims. Themes of questioning the character of the perpetrator and taking the allegations seriously come up throughout the reporting on Kavanaugh.

#### Questioning the Credibility of Victims

The language used to describe Kavanaugh, Ford, and Ramirez reflect a discrediting to the victims. 8 of the 10 articles directly refers to Kavanaugh's status as a judge or a Supreme Court nominee/justice. One NPR article simply refers to Kavanaugh as "The Judge." In contrast, only 2 of the 10 articles introduce Ford as a "Dr." Although it is Kavanaugh's position that makes this case so public, the professional achievements of the women are not equally highlighted in the same way. This bolsters Kavanaugh's credibility and undermines the victims.



Image of Kavanaugh from MSNBC article

#### Trivializing the Allegations

The articles trivialize the sexual assault allegations through their imagery. All the articles include only one image, at the top of the article. 9 of the 10 images are of Kavanaugh. 1 of the images is of Ford. The allegations themselves appear to be swept up in the political imagery of Kavanaugh. 6 of the 9 articles are closer shots of Kavanaugh's face. The other 3 are further away shots of Kavanaugh and include him sitting at a desk or swearing in to take an oath. In all 9 images, he is in a dark suit. Although his facial expressions often look slightly distressed or concerned, he ultimately always looks calm, collected, and professional.

#### Supporting the Victims

Language is used throughout the articles that humanizes the victims. 4 of the 10 articles highlight the professional experiences of two of the female victims. These articles either title Ford as Dr. Ford or state her profession as a professor of psychology. One of the articles describes Ramirez's professional experiences, sharing that she is "a volunteer and board member at a non-profit group that helps victims of domestic violence." Choosing to include language about the professional work legitimizes the women as more than victims and offers a sense of support.



Image of Ford from Breitbart article

#### Taking the Allegations Seriously

The majority of the articles presented the sexual assault allegations in a way that gave the claims weight and legitimacy. 5 of the 10 articles, half, used straightforward language and descriptions to report the allegations. Words like "alleged" and "attempted" described the accusation. These articles also detailed the claims by directly quoting the reports made by the victims. The articles did not summarize the allegations or use dramatic language to bias the reports. Fairly presenting the allegations present a tone of seriousness. These articles did not attempt to undermine the claims made by the victims.

### Discussion

My analysis did not explicitly focus on the way the political ideology of each source influenced its reporting of the case. Instead, articles chosen from a range in sources was done to create a more representative sample. However, it is worth mentioning the ways that the political biases in the sources impacted its reporting, especially with the more neutral sources. It is not surprising that both Breitbart (the far-right news source) and Occupy Democrats (the far-left news source) would use extreme language and opinionated reporting. Breitbart's reporting more explicitly promoted rape myths while Occupy Democrats reporting more explicitly promoted the counter narrative. NPR, the Washington Times, and MSNBC promoted both narratives.

Neutral and less politicized media sources present the issue of unintentionally promoting a rape myth narrative. Although bias is inevitable, journalistic reporting is not meant to take a side. It instead presents a truthful piece of reality that allows for the reader to draw their own conclusion. Perhaps in attempts to remain less biased, neutral media sources present what they believe is an accurate account of the story. However, by not actively working against the culturally embedded, hegemonic, and historically-supported approach to talking about rape and sexual assault, the media sources perpetuate rape myths.

### Conclusion

Further studies on rape myths and the media could also consider how the #MeToo movement has impacted or not impacted the perpetuation of rape myths. Literature and research on the #MeToo movement is developing and could offer a continuation to Brownmiller's history of rape. The #MeToo movement fights to make the prevalence of sexual assault and rape recognized and potentially has helped combat rape myths. Through this research, my hope is that conversations on how to end the perseverance of rape myths would continue. More specifically, I hope that journalism ethics classes and trainings would include curriculum on rape myths. If journalists do not know about rape myths and how they are easily perpetuated by media reporting, it is challenging to combat those myths. This research should provide insight into the shifts in rape myths and how to help strengthen a more authentication narrative.

### Selected References

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