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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

"These Women are Making a Statement Against Rape and yet the only Thing Y'All can Focus on is 'Eww They're Naked'": Exploring Rape Culture on Facebook in South Africa

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Abstract

Sexual assault on campuses has been identified as a pervasive public health problem. In April 2016, students across South African universities launched the #Endrapeculture campaign to express their frustration against university policies which served to perpetuate a rape culture. The use of hashtag activism during the protest served to spark online public debates and mobilize support for the protests. This article describes the public reactions to the South African #Endrapeculture protests on the Facebook social media platform. Data was collected through natural observations of comment threads on news articles and public posts on the student protests, and subjected to content analysis. The findings suggest that the #nakedprotest was successful in initiating public conversations concerning the issue of rape culture. However, the reactions towards the #nakedprotest were divided with some perpetuating a mainstream public discourse which perpetuates rape culture, and others (re)presenting a counter-public that challenged current dominant views about rape culture. Two related main themes emerged: *Victim-blaming* and *Trivialising Rape Culture*. Victim-blaming narratives emerged from the commenters and suggested that the protesters were increasing their chances of being sexually assaulted by marching topless. This discourse seems to perpetuate the notion of the aggressive male sexual desire and places the onus on women to protect themselves. Other commenters criticised the #nakedprotest method through demeaning comments which served to derail the conversation and trivialise the message behind the protest. The public reaction to the #nakedprotest demonstrated that rape culture is pervasive in society and continues to be re(produced) through discourse on social media platforms. However, social media also offers individuals the opportunity to draw from and participate in multiple counter-publics which challenge these mainstream rape culture discourses.

Keywords Rape culture · Social media · Qualitative · Content analysis · Facebook comments · University protest

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Introduction

Immortalised in Greek Mythology and pop culture alike, Medusa is recognised as a monstrous, snake-headed creature who preys on men of all ages. However, a lesser-known detail about the Gorgon is that the origin of her appearance is a result of her rape. Indeed, Medusa was once a beautiful woman who caught the attention of the sea god, Poseidon. Following her rejection, Poseidon attacked Medusa in the temple of Athena, where she was seeking refuge. Athena, who was angered at the desecration of her sacred temple, turned Medusa into the famed monster. This centuries-old myth represents themes of a rape culture, which is continuously perpetuated to this day. The term 'rape culture' was first conceptualised in 1975 by Susan Brownmiller in her book, *Against our will,* to describe a culture or pervasive ideology, in which sexual violence is the norm and victims are consequently blamed for their assaults [4, 21, 26, 40]. Drawing from social construction theory, researchers have determined that rape is perpetuated through the construction of rape culture [39]. That is, societal attitudes or behaviours towards gender and sexuality that normalise sexual violence, are constructed and reproduced in society through modelling and social learning [4, 21, 39, 40]. Rape culture promotes rape by socialising boys and men to be sexual aggressors, and girls and woman to be sexually passive [26]. Consequently, society has accepted that relationships involving male sexual aggression are natural and normal [40].

At the time of its release, Brownmiller's book was credited with changing public perception and attitudes towards rape, which in turn influenced changes in American laws regarding rape [10]. Despite this influence, it seems that for the last few decades the concept of rape culture itself has remained within gender and feminist studies discourse. It is only more recently that we see discussions and critiques around rape culture entering the mainstream discourse. This is evident in the increase of global social media movements such as #TimesUp, #MeToo, and #MenAreTrash, which were formed as a way to draw attention to the prevalence of sexual assault in various spheres of life and to critique societal norms which allow these acts to continue. The revival of the concept of rape culture in the public consciousness can be attributed to the growth of digital feminism and activism, which utilises social media technologies to develop counter-publics, and in turn, allows users to initiate and engage in conversations about sexual violence that challenge and contradict established social and legal norms by circumventing the gatekeepers of traditional media [35]. Various studies have shown that social media has the potential to be a significant tool of public education, engagement and activism. However, as with any new technological advancement, we need to understand the mechanisms which support and influence communication phenomena and engagement on these platforms.

According to Baym and Boyd [2], social media complicates the nature of public life as it mirrors, magnifies and complicates various aspects of everyday life, which allows people to critique and question practices that are presumed to be stable and to raise awareness about social issues. In other words, we find ourselves replicating real-world practices, behaviours and attitudes in our social

media spaces. However, in social media, the boundaries between presence and absence, time and space, freedom of speech and censoring, and private and public are blurred and reconstructed [2]. Therefore, to better understand online engagement and discourse concerning social problems such as rape culture, we must consider the role and functionality of the 'public' and 'counter-publics' that existed before the rise of these platforms.

The term 'counter-public' was first coined by Felski (1989) and later refined by Fraser (1990) to critique Habermas' (1989) notion of the 'public sphere' [38]. According to Habermas, the public sphere emerged during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when relatively well-off individuals gathered together as a group of private individuals to engage on matters of mutual and public concern and consequently served to mediate between the state and private individuals [7]. Central to Habermas' ideal of the public sphere are the principles of universal inclusion and absolute equality among its members, both of which are necessary to ensure transparency and successful engagement in the public sphere. However, in reality, the public sphere was much less open and less equal than Habermas' account suggests. According to Charles and Rohwer [7], access to the public was associated with the white, male middle-class, as people of colour, women, workers and other marginalised groups have historically been excluded from participation in these public spheres.

Despite the exclusion of these groups, the 'public' maintained its claim of open and universal participation and in doing so perpetuated the idea that 'public concerns' reflected the interests of all rather than the 'white, male, literate and propertied' subjects who made up the public [7]. Consequently, counter-publics were formed as alternative publics that served as a forum where those who were excluded from public participation could share their narratives and lived experiences and legitimize their counter-discourse by challenging mainstream publics to acknowledge and respond to these realities [7, 25]. For example, scholars have studied how the exclusion of women and African Americans from public engagements have led to the rise of the Feminist counter-public and the Black Public Sphere as alternative routes of public engagement and political influence [7, 25]. These counter-publics gained traction through various avenues such as the increased availability of feminist and/or African American journals, the establishment of organisations such as the Negro Women's Club Movement, the development of feminist literary circles and organised activism [7]. However, the opposition of these counter-publics served as a threat to the values and ideals of the dominant mainstream public, and as a result, were stigmatized and deemed inferior as a way of discrediting the movements [7]. Therefore, we need to move away from narratives which describe the public as a space of equal access and participation, rather we must understand the public sphere as a desirable space of privilege and legitimacy. In contrast, the counter-publics represent the Other, the deviation from the norm of society [7]. This point is crucial in understanding how societal problems affecting people of colour, women, members of the LGBT + community, migrants and many other groups continue to be invalidated or dismissed in the public sphere.

In the context of feminist activism, the 'counter-public' represents a plurality of intersecting spheres to account for specific discursive spaces and practices of

women's experiences and knowledge which seek to infiltrate and dismantle dominant narratives within a patriarchal sphere [35, 38, 24]. Several studies illustrate how young people, feminists, and activists utilise social media to raise awareness, and hold perpetrators and those responsible for practices of rape culture accountable when mainstream media fails to do so [1, 18, 39]. Social scientists stressed the importance of investigating the presence and nature of rape culture on social media as this has become the standard of how many people acquire their news and viewpoints on cultural issues [35, 39, 40]. For example, the majority of young women in the United States report that they were first made aware of concepts such as "rape culture' through social media platforms [35]. It is thus suggested that social media may serve as a pedagogical tool and a key resource for feminist education and activist terminology. Indeed, studies have documented how young people in the global south have utilised social media as a tool of empowerment to disseminate information and mobilise support for social change [1, 22, 27]. However, there remains a dearth of research examining the phenomena of rape culture on social media platforms [40].

#Endrapeculture Protest in South Africa

In April 2016, students from university campuses across South Africa precipitated protests and hashtag campaigns such as #endrapeculture, #nakedprotest, #endpatriarchy and #chapter212 (referring to the South African constitution which aims to protect the rights, safety and dignity of all students), to raise awareness of universities' policies relating to sexual assault and rape on campus, which were critiqued for perpetuating a rape culture [20]. The protests were a clear indication of students' frustration with universities' lack of addressing rape and sexual assault on campus and the various institutional policies which may inadvertently be contributing to the problem [19]. This problem is not unique to South Africa, as campus administrations in other parts of the world are being criticised for the role they play in protecting the perpetrator and engaging in processes of victim-blaming [11, 23]. Through the use of the hashtag campaigns, the South African #endrapeculture student protests reflected an online counter-public which served to attract attention, spark debates and mobilise support for the rape culture protests. Additionally, by using these hashtags, the South African protests mirrored similar rape culture protests that occurred in other universities across the globe, thereby strengthening the reach and scope of these counter-publics [18, 35, 40].

The current study explored rape culture discourse that emerged from the social media debates regarding the South African #endrapeculture protests. According to Zalenski et al., the communication that occurs within social media platforms can either reinforce or challenge the dominant socially constructed view of rape culture [40]. From a postmodern feminist framework, it can be argued that social media can perpetuate the hegemonic language and power found within a patriarchal society that undermines women and reinforces male sexual aggression [15]. Alternatively, social media can challenge the dominant narrative and bring new information to light that deconstructs the dominant ways of framing reality and its associated

binary categories. Various studies have shown that rape and sexual assault is a prevalent problem within university and college campuses [18, 33]. Exploring the comments relating to the #endrapeculture protests provides insights regarding a rape culture within this context. Understanding this discourse and exploring the way it emerged and was constructed on social media can provide information to inform educational efforts and interventions to address sexual assault and rape on campus. Additionally, it can provide insight into the potential and limits of social media as a tool to address these issues on campus [1, 40].

Methodology

An exploratory design with a constructionist strategy of inquiry was used as this paradigm is centred on the assumption that meaning is constructed by humans as they engage in the world they interpret [5, 9]. This approach is aligned with the post-modern feminist framework used in this study, which involves challenging dominant knowledge claims, especially those that suggest a universal 'truth' exists which can be seen as ahistorical and stable [15].

Data Collection

Natural observation was conducted on the comment section of Facebook posts relating to the April 2016 #endrapeculture student protest. Facebook was chosen as a suitable site to conduct the natural observation of the comment section, as it is a popular social media site and the comments were available in the public domain. Considering that the posts were public; there was no need to request access to online communities, nor was there any need to request consent [34, 39, 40].

During the data collection phase, news stories and public posts relating to the 2016 #endrapeculture protests were searched for on Facebook using the hashtags: #RUReferenceList, #nakedprotest, #endrapeculture and #chapter212. Only public posts and articles that were posted during the #Endrapeculture and #nakedprotests (between 11 and 30 April), with a comment thread of 10 or more comments were included in the analysis [30, 40]. According to Lijadi and van Schalkwyk, Facebook posts that generate more than 10 comments indicate sufficient discussion and are suitable for observation [30]. Posts meeting the abovementioned criteria were copied into a data sheet along with the comments. The data sheet indicated the type of post (i.e. personal, news report, video etc.), the date posted, the date accessed, the number of shares and reactions [34] and the number of comments. During the data cleaning phase, the comments were copied into a new document, formatted and de-identified by deleting the profile pictures, usernames and any other personal information of the commenters. None of the comments was translated as we tried to keep to the original text. During the de-identification process, we numbered each user and used the letter 'M' to designate male users and 'F' for female users (ex. User 1, F).

Data Analysis

The data sheets were loaded onto Atlas ti and analysed through qualitative content analysis. Content analysis describes a process of analysing written, verbal or visual communication messages [8, 14]. As a research method, content analysis is used as a systematic and objective means of describing and quantifying phenomena, with the purpose of making replicable and valid inferences from data, to provide new insights and a guide for practical action [14]. A total of 590 comments were collected from eight Facebook posts in August 2017.

The data analysis involved the construction of an unconstrained categorisation matrix based on themes from previous studies. However, due to the scarcity of studies that specifically explored rape culture discourse on social media platforms, we also utilized information from other studies delineating the concept of rape culture to develop the categorisation matrix [1, 2, 4, 18, 33, 40]. The initial categories included *victim-blaming, perpetrator support, survivor support*, *statements about the Law and society*, and the *presence of patriarchy*. Using an unconstrained categorisation matrix allowed for inductive principles to filter through the analysis process, by viewing the categories in the matrix as fluid rather than fixed [8, 14]. This approach was more aligned with the postmodern feminist framework of this study, by recognising that current concepts and categories of rape culture are not static nor universally true. Following the development of the matrix, the authors re-read the data to better understand the context and nature of the comments. The first round of coding in Atlas ti involved developing conceptual codes to describe the data. Following this, codes were further refined and categorised using the matrix. Some of the codes that emerged as significant did not align with the initial codes in the unconstrained matrix. As such, some of the themes in the matrix were removed and new themes were added to the matrix to better reflect the data. The methodology of this study is described in further detail in another article [34].

Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of the Western Cape's Senate Research and Ethics committee. As this study involved collecting data on social media, ethical decision making surrounding this study was based upon the guidelines proposed by The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) [32], the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Inter-Mediated Research Document [3] and the Facebook privacy policy. With regards to the natural observation of the comment section of posts concerning the #Endrapeculture protests, the comments were already posted in a public domain and could be read and accessed by any person with a Facebook account. Furthermore, the Facebook privacy policy states that users can control who is able to view the information they post or share. When a Facebook user shares a status update or other form of media, they can use the

audience selector tool to determine if the post will be shared with friends or with the public [16]. Based on this, it is argued that the comments on the #endrape-culture posts are perceived in the public domain as they interacted with people in the comment section that were not their 'Facebook friends'. As such, the natural observation of the comment section did not require consent, as the information was publically available.

Findings

The findings from the current study suggest that the #nakedprotest was successful in introducing the concept of rape culture to the mainstream public and eliciting discussion centred on the topic of rape culture in society. This can be seen in the type of posts (i.e. mainstream media such as radio and news pages reporting on the protest) and the quantity and context of the comments. Since we only included articles that were posted during the time of the protest, we may have missed articles that were posted in the days after the protest. Additionally, Facebook functions according to a specific algorithm which could potentially have influenced the search results. However, based on the rich nature of the data, we find that the included comments were sufficient. A total of 590 comments from eight Facebook posts were collected and analysed (Table 1). Theoretical saturation was reached at this point, in which no new themes emerged from the data and comments began to seem repetitive [30, 40].

Based on the recommendations by Lijadi and van Schalkwyk it can be concluded that the #nakedprotest action was successful in generating sufficient discussion in relation to the posts [30]. Although little standardisation exists regarding how to draw inferences on the significance of the level of engagement per post through the number of posts and comments on Facebook, a similar study exploring the perceptions of rape culture on a campus in the United States of America collected comment threads from posts made by two local news stations that had 87 and 940 comments, respectively [18].

Table 1 Summary of user engagement for each Facebook post analysed

Posted by	Type of post	Number of comments	Reactions	Shares
News page	Post with a video link	239	597	609
Public entertainment page	Feature article	123	2403	615
Radio page	Public	83	90	0
Facebook user	Public	50	151	135
Facebook user	Public	48	46	6
News page	Feature article	23	34	1
University entertainment page	Anonymous post	13	71	1
Facebook user	Public	11	214	7
Total		590	3606	1374

The findings from this study suggest that the public reaction to the #nakedprotest was divided between mainstream public and counter-public discourses; with some of the commenters criticising the protesters and their method of protesting, and others showing their support of the campaign. Commenters who were against the protest were shown to perpetuate a rape culture discourse through attitudes related to *victim-blaming* and *trivialising rape culture*. On the other hand, some commenters supported the protest and in doing so formed an online counter-public, which served to challenge the dominant narratives that perpetuated rape culture. The following section will highlight the two themes of *victim-blaming* and *trivialising rape culture* in relation to these two opposing reactions.

Victim-Blaming

Victim-blaming is functional, as it serves to uphold the power relations in society by absolving perpetrators from punishment and allowing individuals to socially distance themselves from victims of rape and sexual assault [31, 39]. Traditionally, when we hear the phrase "victim-blaming," it is usually related to the context of rape and sexual assault. Various studies have focused on exploring and measuring constructs of victim-blaming as it relates to sexual assault specifically [12, 13, 29, 39, 40]. The findings suggest that some of the commenters perpetuated victim-blaming practices through comments directed at the #nakedprotesters. These narratives were often challenged by people who called out those commenters for victim-blaming.

Perpetuating Victim-Blaming

> ***User 4 (M)*** *Some of the rapist were busy playing "my mother told me to choose that 1 but l want the best of them all" pointing so if any of them fine ones get raped don't be astonished cause they asking for it*
> ***User 3 (M)*** *By exposing your body you are creating more rapists, my dear. Would rather demonstrate fully covered to stop any potential rapist. As it stands you are very inviting*

In the first comment, User 4 suggests that rapists observing the #nakedprotesters were planning on choosing their next victim from the protesters. He also suggests that by marching topless, the protesters are asking to be raped, therefore, they should not be surprised if it happens. The second comment suggests that the display of naked female bodies can create more rapists. On the other hand, protesting fully covered would be more effective to stop 'potential rapists'. The comment further suggests that the protester's naked bodies are an invitation.

In previous studies, victim-blaming emerged in discussions centred on how believable the survivor's accounts were [18, 39, 40]. In these studies, commenters would point out details surrounding the circumstances in which the assault occurred to portray the survivor as an unreliable storyteller that was somehow complicit in their assault (e.g. "she wanted it" or "no1 believes the slut who cried rape") [39,

40]. These studies focused on exploring a rape culture discourse that emerged on social media following a publicised event of sexual assault (ex. Bill Cosby case or the Steubenville rape trials). In these cases, the victim-blaming narrative is linear and easily recognised. However, the #Endrapecultre and #nakedprotests were not aimed at seeking justice for a specific victim(s) of sexual assault, rather they were trying to create awareness of the broader social mechanisms which allow rape to be perpetuated, specifically on university campuses. Therefore, it was surprising that victim-blaming emerged as such a dominant theme in our study.

Both of the above comments suggest that woman being topless is seen as an invitation to be raped; thereby implying that the way a woman dresses can either bring occasion to or prevent sexual assault. This serves to reinforce the notion that women need to take responsibility to prevent themselves from becoming victims of sexual assault by dressing "appropriately" [31, 35].

Victim-blaming is an integral part of rape culture discourse as it relates to the normalisation of male sexual violence in society. This narrative suggests that we are taught that sexual violence and male sexual aggression is the norm [4, 21]. Therefore, women are expected to anticipate sexual violence against them and should subsequently enforce behaviours and actions to avoid such encounters. Essentially the argument follows that if women enter a situation where there is a strong chance they might be assaulted, they should avoid engaging in behaviours that may increase that chance. However, the fallacy of this argument is revealed when women, children and men become victims of sexual assault in circumstances where sexual violence is not anticipated. In these cases, the victim-blaming narrative becomes incompatible. For example, news reports of rape cases where victims were subsequently murdered, are free of comments regarding the victim's circumstances and are rather replaced with calls for justice and the perpetuation of narratives portraying rape and rapists as senseless deviants needing to be locked away from society. A recent example of this is the case of uyinene mrwetyana, a young student who was raped and murdered on the 24th of August 2019 after she went to collect a package by the Post Office [28]. Following this, thousands of South Africans gathered to protest the ongoing gendered based violence affecting the country [28].

This disjunction is related to the "just-world hypothesis", a cognitive bias that an individual receives morally fair outcomes and consequences based on their behaviours and actions [39]. Just world beliefs (JWB) derive from people's desire to live in a world that is just and fair, thereby perpetuating a 'you reap what you sow' mentality [29]. In this framework, victims are blamed for their misfortunes, whether it is related to abuse, sexual assault or poverty [29].

The comments related to the #nakedprotest implicitly reveal that the protesters should have known better than to march topless in the streets where they may be "inviting" a "potential rapist" to take action. Comments such as these serve to warn the protesters by pointing out that their behaviour might result in them being sexually assaulted, and if this should happen they would have no one to blame but themselves. Furthermore, by describing the "potential rapists" the commenters are reinforcing the notion that rape is faceless, and driven by male sexual needs. Consequently, this leads to the belief that rape is a deviant event that happens to women who failed to follow societal warnings to keep themselves safe [39]. In line

with JWB, the protesters are seen as violating societal standards of appropriate and acceptable dress. Therefore, they become rape-able.

Challenging Victim-Blaming

> ***User 7 (F)*** *Stop victim blaming! These protests need to happen so people like you can gain awareness that the issue isn't with the victim. Your analogy is a clear indication of this very issue. Why should kids be given the responsibility not to be free or naked if they please so they don't 'provoke' or 'seduce' the monsters? Cause that's what paedophiles and rapists are right? Senseless beasts who can't control themselves so we shift the blame to the victim because they provoked the senseless animalistic being that has no control over themselves? This is what your analogy is communicating to myself and many others*
> ***User 8 (F)*** *User 46 there is no such thing as displaying yourself for more rape, that's disgusting. No one should be deemed rape-able or blame the victim of rape. Stop justifying rape and making it seems like it's a sequence of events that leads to the act of rape. The mere fact that sweets are on display in a shop does not mean you have a right to steal them. That should be common sense*.

The above comments suggest that commenters who supported the protest recognised the victim-blaming comments aimed towards the #nakedprotesters and challenged these through posting their own counter-narratives. The comment made by User 7 attempts to challenge the idea that rapists and paedophiles are unable to control their sexual desires and that the 'victim' should not take responsibility. Similarly, User 8′s comment uses an analogy to draw attention to the fact that what a woman wears should not be considered an invitation to rape.

Recently, the #safetytipsforladies movement trended across social media. This movement was started by Hilary Brownman-Smart in March 2013 to express her exasperation with the dominant anti-rape advice articles which serve to perpetuate victim-blaming attitudes [36]. According to Brownman-Smart:

> I am absolutely *sick to death* of being told what to wear and what to do and how to be, as though *any of that* will somehow save me from being raped. It's not a woman's responsibility to prevent sexual assault. How about we teach men not to rape instead? [36]

According to Furuhata, this hashtag movement represented a 'symbolic rerouting' of anti-rape discourse that marks a change in the direction concerning how we talk about and politicise sexual violence and its prevention [36]. The findings suggest that counter-narratives on victim-blaming stemming from Hashtag movements such as #safetytipsforladies are being reproduced in online debates such as these, which provides more support for similar counter-publics across the globe. Therefore, the commenters may not have consciously set out to form a counter-public (and may not even be aware of its existence). However, by drawing attention to and challenging the comments which perpetuated victim-blaming, they echoed similar

counter-publics formed in other contexts, and in doing so increased the reach of the victim-blaming counter-narrative.

Trivialising Rape Culture

Rape culture is maintained through a variety of mechanisms. However, denial of rape culture and the silencing of victims are two disempowering methods [6, 37]. Denial is sustained and maintained through shared values, violence and fear. Families and friends of perpetrators of sexual violence deny that someone they know could be capable of such an act. By accepting the realities of rape and rape culture, people need to accept that rapists are not mentally disturbed deviants, rather they are people who have social ties, and can, therefore, be someone who is known to them. They would need to accept that sensible people in their lives are in fact capable of committing such a senseless act of violence. The denial of both the act of rape and the culture that perpetuates it leads to the assumption that neither the act nor the culture exists [37]. However, to deny rape culture when it presents with real social ramifications is to deny the experiences of those who have been affected by it [6].

Throughout the comment section, rape culture trivialisation emerged through discourse aimed at criticising the protest method and demeaning the protesters. On the other end of the spectrum, people called out the commenters who focused more on other aspects of the protest, rather than the message being conveyed.

Demeaning the Protesters

> ***User 20 (M)*** *These people obviously don't want to study, next they will be protesting about cloudy days or being lied to about father Christmas. Let's start protesting about the healthy gym freaks because they make the rest of us look fat..!*
> ***User 25 (M)*** *But protesting like this is so outright pathetic and attention seeking*
> ***User 26 (M)*** *Don't you people have anything better to do¿????????? How can the situation be so out of control that this needs to be protested in this manner?*

The above comments are aimed at the #nakedprotesters and suggest that these protesters are only raising the issue at hand because they do not want to study. The comment made by User 26 suggests a sense of denial as he does not believe the situation to be so bad that it warrants protest action. These comments suggest that people engaged in ad hominem tactics, a fallacious argumentative strategy which hinders effective discussion of a topic by attacking the character or motive of the person making the argument [12]. Comments criticising the attire of the protesters present with a two-fold function. On the one hand, it reinforces sexualised and heteronormative views of the female body. On the other hand, it serves to trivialise the message behind the protest as the commenters choose to focus more on the protester's state of undress, rather than engaging with the issues being raised.

Challenging Trivialisation Tactics

> ***User 39 (F)*** *"These women are making a statement against rape and yet the only thing y'all can focus on is 'eww they're naked'*
> ***User 27 (F)*** *How is being raped by your fellow student nonsense? Everyone has a right to education and a chosen profession. If you're a victim of rape should you judge carry on with your studies as if nothing happened? What if it happens to someone else?*
> ***User 32 (F)*** *Are people so indoctrinated by rape culture that the ONLY THING they took from this video is the fact that there are exposed breasts?*
> ***User 16 (F)*** *(User 24, F) you are focusing on one aspect of this protest and condemning it.*

The comment made by User 27 challenges the idea that the student protest is 'nonsense' by challenging people to think about it in a way that personalises the situation, while the comments made by User 32 and User 16 challenge the fact that some people only seem to focus on one aspect of the protest, rather than the message. The above comments also point towards the emergence of a counter-public within the comment threads. These commenters directly challenged those who insulted the protesters or focused more on the method rather than the message of rape culture, which was emphasised as the problem.

Discussion

The present study explored rape culture discourses resulting from the public reactions towards the #Endrapeculture and #nakedprotests that occurred across South African campuses in April 2016. Similar to previous studies [1, 18, 22, 39, 40], we found that social media played a key role, not only in drawing attention to the protest, but also providing a space for people to engage in debate and discussion around the topic of rape culture. Furthermore, the findings suggest that rape culture discourses were prominent within the comment threads, with victim-blaming and trivialising rape culture representing the dominant attitudes of expression. These reactions to the protests are not unique to the current context as previous studies exploring perceptions of rape culture on social media also found victim-blaming attitudes to be a significant finding [39, 40]. Therefore these findings are not altogether surprising. Indeed, for the past few decades, research on rape and its related factors have shown that the dominant mainstream attitudes towards rape and sexual assault have persistently reflected a rape culture discourse in which women are often shamed and blamed for their assault.

However, what has changed is the increased availability and access to social media and communication technologies which allows people to discuss issues around rape at a much broader level than ever before. Previous studies have shown that social media represents a growing arena of engagement, discussion and conflict between those who speak out against the perpetuation of rape culture through

practices of victim-blaming, slut-shaming and perpetrator support and those who engage in these cultural practices [18, 38, 39, 40]. Similarly, our findings also indicate the emergence of an online counter-public, as many commenters rejected and challenged discourses which perpetuated victim-blaming practices and trivialised the issue by focusing more on the method of the protest, rather than the message behind it. Previous studies have shown how young feminists use social media to respond to rape culture and hold accountable the purveyors of its practices and ways of thinking when mainstream media, police and other authorities do not [35, 36]. The findings from this study reflect previous studies which indicate that people who challenge victim-blaming and the trivialisation of rape culture online seek to interrupt the cultural support that normalises male sexual violence [36, 38, 39]. It indicates that people can use social media to collectively respond and challenge dominant discourses surrounding sexual violence and rape culture.

Based on this, we wish to highlight two points. Firstly, our findings support previous studies that found victim-blaming and trivialising rape culture to be dominant themes, which it is concerning. As previously mentioned, the victim-blaming discourses emerged in our study, despite the lack of an identifiable victim. This suggests that victim-blaming discourses are ingrained in the public consciousness, even in the absence of sexual assault. Additionally, we argue that these unchanging attitudes towards rape, sexual assault and gender-based violence suggest that the mainstream patriarchal public sphere has failed to accept and legitimise the counter-narratives resulting from the feminist counter-public. According to Gouws, it is important to understand the way we talk about rape culture, or the discourse around rape culture, as this determines how rape culture is constructed, the extent and nature of moral outrage, and which solutions are pursued [20]. Furthermore, this discourse determines to what extent rape culture will be conceptualised as a political, societal, and institutional or health-related problem, and will thus be addressed according to those terms [20]. Therefore, government, public health officials, media and policy makers must address this issue by increasing public awareness and education around rape culture.

Secondly, we wish to highlight the significant role social media plays in creating and maintaining counter publics which challenge mainstream discourse around rape culture. Before the advent of digital and social media communication technologies, people had to engage in various strategies and modes of communication to firstly establish a counter-public and secondly, to maintain it despite efforts from the public to dismantle and outlaw these groups [7, 25]. Despite these struggles, we see that these counter-publics were successful in bringing about various legislative changes such as the abolishment of the Jim Crow laws and the advent of women's suffrage [7]. These changes were made possible as the counter-publics provided the opportunity of increased public participation from those individuals who were previously excluded. Social media platforms allow people to continue and improve upon the practice of developing and maintaining counter-publics. For example, the 2016 #Endrapeculture protest not only mobilised support from universities across South Africa, it also allows for comparison to be drawn and lessons to be learnt from similar protests in other parts of the world, thereby increasing the scope and shared narrative of rape culture as a counter discourse.

However, these movements are not without critique. Scholar researching online movements have often suggested that social media can be used for slacktivism [17]. In other words, the activism that occurs on these platforms are seen as superficial at best and do not translate to real-world changes [17]. Here we reiterate the argument made by Baym and Boyd [2] to state that real-world practices are often replicated on social media. In other words, any form of activism and advocacy that occurs on these platforms is driven by individual determinism, not the technology itself. Based on our findings, we are unable to make conclusions regarding the 'real world changes' that may have resulted from the #endrapeculture protests, however, we do argue that the value of social media lies in its ability to create opportunities for people to learn and engage on a variety of social issues that they otherwise may not have been exposed to. This in turn, allows for the proliferation of counter-narratives which lend support to counter-publics.

To utilise social media technology effectively as a tool to aid in rape culture education and activism, we need to first understand how people use these platforms to engage in discussion and debate. Therefore, rape culture attitudes and practices online are reflective of attitudes and practices offline. As such, understanding the role of social media in shaping public opinions, attitudes and willingness to speak out against sexual assault can contribute to the facilitation of preventative measures against rape and sexual assault.

Limitations

We found that social media may be a valuable tool for researchers, both as a research site and a data collection tool [30, 34]. Facebook is considered one of the most popular social networking sites and through this platform, we were able to collect rich qualitative data in a short amount of time. Therefore, we note that our findings are limited to this context as we did not include data from any other social media platform in the analysis. However, the results from our study are useful as it allows for comparisons to be made with similar studies. For example, Stubbs-Richardson et al. [39] examined rape culture discourse on Twitter and also found victim-blaming to be a dominant theme. Additionally, as the comments were collected in retrospect, there was no way for us to interact with the users in real-time. However, in another article, we explain how we conducted focus groups on Facebook as a way of triangulating the data [34]. Another point of consideration is related to the gender of the commenters and the language they used to post comments. For this study, we could only determine the gender of the participants based on their usernames and profiles. However, we recognize that in doing so overlooks the multiplicity of gendered expression (and the intersection of sexuality) that may occur on these platforms. As such, the current study could not conclude how gender and sexuality intersect with GBV and rape culture discourse. While we did not include language as part of our analysis, it was interesting to note that the comments were posted in English. Considering the diverse language demographics in South Africa, this suggests that many of the commenters may have been communicating in their second or third language [34]. From a linguistic perspective, it would be interesting to see how rape culture

is expressed in different languages. However, this also raises questions regarding the strategies individuals use to participate in publics and counter-publics. More research is needed to understand how factors such as gender (from a non-binary perspective) and language may influence rape culture discourse, and what effect these have on legitimising narratives that emerge from the counter-public.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent No informed consent was needed for this study.

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