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Reactions to Highly Publicized Sexual Assault Cases via Twitter Over Time

Abstract

In public spaces, do reactions to sexual assault cases depict more of a victim blaming or offender blaming attitude? How has that changed over time?

Prior to collecting data, I hypothesized that I would find more Tweets portraying a victim blaming attitude rather than offender blaming. This hypothesis was ultimately derived from the research I did and the other studies I looked at.

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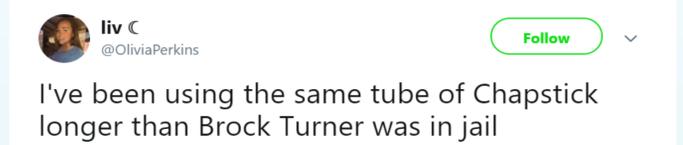
Reactions to Highly Publicized Sexual Assault Cases via Twitter Over Time

By Tessa Sulimowicz
St. John Fisher College

Research Question & Hypothesis

In public spaces, do reactions to sexual assault cases depict more of a victim blaming or offender blaming attitude? How has that changed over time?

Prior to collecting data, I hypothesized that I would find more Tweets portraying a victim blaming attitude rather than offender blaming. This hypothesis was ultimately derived from the research I did and the other studies I looked at.



Twitter & Rape Culture

Twitter has changed the speed at which we communicate and has become a tool to different campaigns, such as “Me Too” but unfortunately, it gives the same ability to the darker sides of issues (Tomblason and Wolf, 15). Twitter allows everyone and anyone to weigh in on sexual assault cases and thus victims are succumbed to many more judgmental eyes and unwarranted opinions. Studies have shown that rape culture is found in high volumes on Twitter and victim blaming is a prevailing attitude (Zaleski, Gundersen, Baes, Estupinian, and Vergara, 926). Due to the fact that Twitter gives everyone the ability to give their opinions about sexual assault, a very hostile environment is created, often towards the victims of sexual assault.

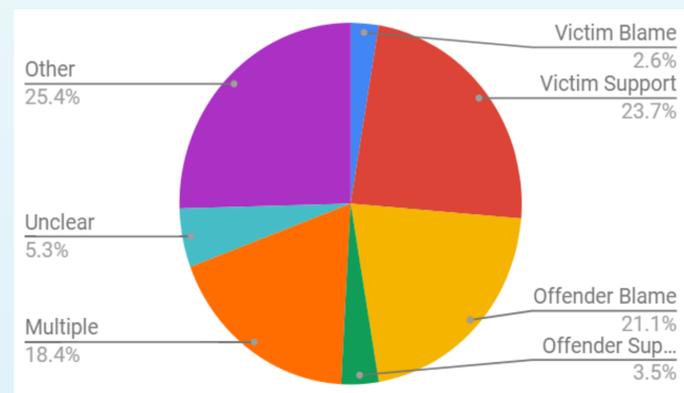
Methodology

Case	Number of Tweets	Number of Interactions
Brock Turner (2015)	34	185,232
Larry Nassar (2018)	39	54,967
Daisy Coleman (2012)	29	1,464
Audrie Potts (2012)	4	53
Steubenville (2012)	9	24

For each case, I used different search terms. I then proceeded to randomly choose Tweets with no real restrictions regarding time periods due to the fact that the cases continue to be discussed well after the occurred.

It can be seen that the more recent cases have more Tweets that were found as well as more interactions overall versus the cases from 2012 which had less Tweets found and less interactions.

Results



Results for Category 1: "Type"

Audrie Potts & Steubenville

- Of the handful of the Tweets found surrounding these two cases, the majority were victim supporting.
- The Tweets were then found to be a form of direct support.

Brock Turner Case

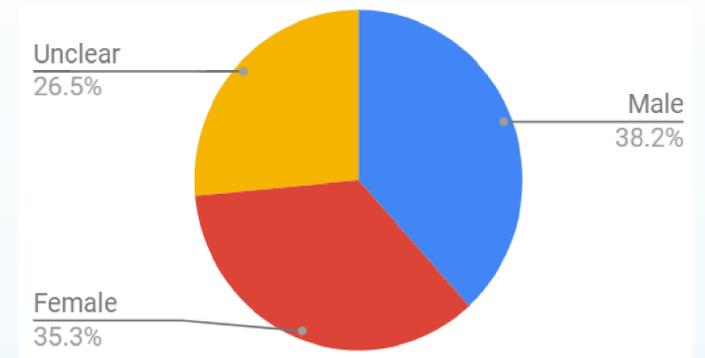
- Many of the Tweets found discussed the length of Turner’s sentence.
- The majority of the victim blaming Tweets and offender support Tweets came from the Brock Turner case.
- Still, the majority of the Tweets surrounding the Turner case were offender blaming.

Larry Nassar Case

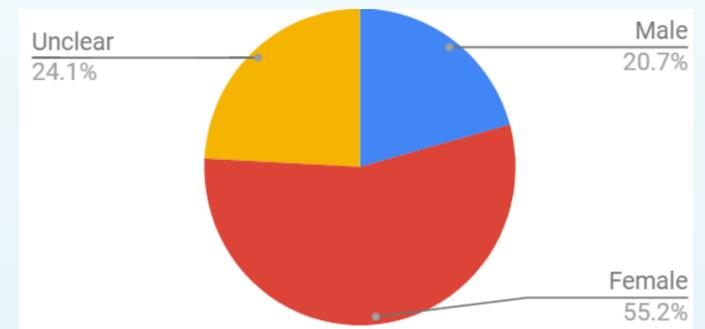
- Many of the Tweets surrounding this case were news stories.
- The majority of the Tweets surrounding the Nassar case were victim supporting which has to do with the amount of women Nassar sexually abused.

Daisy Coleman Case

- An overwhelming amount of the Tweets were victim support.
- The Tweets that fell under the victim support attitude were then found to be forms of direct support.



Gender of the authors of Tweets regarding the Brock Turner case.



Gender of the authors of Tweets regarding the Daisy Coleman case.

Conclusion

Based on the results, it seems that as a whole, society is progressing in terms of sexual assault and the responses to it. The majority of Tweets found fell under the victim support and offender blame categories. Along with that, there were more males Tweeting about the more recent cases than the older ones. It’s also important to note the evolution of Twitter from opinion based to a source of news.

Citations

Wellman, Ashley, et al. “What’s Trending? #SexualAssault: An Exploratory Study of Social Media Coverage of Teen Sexual Assaults.” *Western Criminology Review*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2017, pp. 88–105.