

Rape Jokes aren't funny:

The mainstreaming of Rape Jokes in contemporary newspaper discourse

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Abstract

The #MeToo campaign has reminded us that male sexual violence, harassment and abuse towards women is not a new phenomenon. But alongside the visibility of the perpetrators and experiences of myriad women, this recent campaign raises a set of questions as to how this type of violence towards women is normalised and legitimated. Our focus here is on the ways in which male sexual violence towards women is normalised and legitimated through the use of humour. Existing research on responses to, and discussions of, rape jokes and rape culture have primarily focussed on online discourses or television coverage of rape joke controversies. The focus in this paper is if, and how, serious newspaper discourse contributes to the normalisation of male sexual violence towards women. In order to evaluate this, we undertake a thematic analysis of UK newspaper coverage of rape jokes. While there is the potential for the telling of rape jokes to be emancipatory, our findings suggest that news coverage of rape jokes does the ideological work of strengthening rather than challenging gendered power relations. We argue that news coverage of rape jokes in the UK predominantly reinforces and normalises male sexual violence towards women.

Keywords: gender, rape jokes, feminist media studies, newspaper discourse

Introduction

The #MeToo campaign brought in to sharp public focus the ways in which women have been (and still are) subject to a wide range of male sexual abuse, harassment and violence. Our focus in this article is the ways in which male sexual violence is normalised and legitimised through public discourses around humour. This point of departure stems, in part, from experiences at a recent undergraduate event in a Higher Education setting: students had organised an event about political engagement in a bid to encourage young people to actively take part in the political process. The students had organised a public facing show, designed as a *Question Time* style format, with a panel which included some local comedians.¹ During the event a “rape joke” was made, by a white male protagonist, to a diverse audience: If his girlfriend didn’t behave as he said, he would rape her. Some in the audience laughed. Some felt deeply uncomfortable and didn’t laugh; some may have felt compelled to laugh despite the discomfort for fear of being labelled without a sense of humour. This experience raised questions: Why did the audience respond as they had? Why did the comedian think it was acceptable to make jokes about male sexual violence towards women? Why did some of the audience laugh? Why did some feel so uncomfortable?

While clearly establishing the creation and normalisation of cultural norms and practices is a large scale endeavour, and beyond the scope of a single journal article, we have focused our attention on the ways in which mainstream media themselves report stories related to rape jokes and the ways in which this comes to normalise and legitimate the rape joke, and by extension, legitimate the act. Our focus here is not on the content of the rape ‘joke’ itself, but the ways in which media report rape jokes. The ways in which news discussion about rape jokes is framed provides us with cues as to what is considerable acceptable and normal behaviour in our social and cultural context. In seeking to make sense of the responses of a very real experience (of UK students in a UK context) our analysis focused on the role of

news media, in particular newspaper coverage (where reporting was more extensive), to gain a sense of how UK newspaper's discursively constructed the climate of our cultural acceptance of rape jokes.

We begin by outlining the cultural importance of jokes and humour before situating rape jokes in their historical context and linking rape jokes and rape culture. Jokes are constitutive of and iterative with a wider social context; and this context is one which is structured by a system of social practices that organises men and women differently and relies on the persistence of shared cultural beliefs justifying men's greater power and privilege (Cecilia Ridgeway 2011). A densely structured media environment plays a key role in shaping and providing a "real" basis for these cultural beliefs, which we briefly explore. This structures our empirical data, where our media analysis demonstrates how newspaper coverage contributes to this cultural discursive normalisation of male sexual violence towards women.

On the Importance of Jokes

Jokes and joke telling are central features of our everyday relationships and interactions (Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering 2008). The word "joke" comes from the Latin *iocus*, meaning 'play' or 'game' and the term "joke" can be understood on two distinct ways: 1) as a text that often takes a short narrative form that includes a setup and ends in a humorous punchline, and 2) an instance of humour, that can occur anywhere in the text (Salvatore Attardo 2014). Comic intent is important in understanding jokes and joking; the "traditional" setup and punchline structure can signal comic intent (Brett Mills 2005). Phrases such as "Have you heard the one about ..." or "A guy walks into a bar ..." are used across a number of societies to cue comic intent to the audience. John Meyer (2000) observes that humour has

four basic functions. Two functions serve to unite individuals: identification (reducing tension and identifying the joke teller with the audience to create group unity); and clarification (reinforcement of social norms through exposure of their violation which serves to unify audience members). Whereas two other functions serve to divide individuals: enforcement (norm violation that requires correction and involves laughing at the norm violator); and differentiation (joke tellers contrasting their own views and/or their social group views with their individual and group opponents). Meyer's (2000, 313) "paradox of dual humor function" highlights how humour can simultaneously unite and divide. Whether uniting, dividing or both uniting and dividing at the same time, nonetheless humour functions to "delineate social boundaries" (Meyer 2000, 310).

In supporting their case for the critical analysis of humour and comic media, Lockyer and Pickering (2008, 809) argue that humour and comedy should be taken seriously as in some contexts they are "are light-hearted banter", but in others "it can injure people's social standing, or cut deeply into relationships and interaction between people within and across different social groups". They also highlight that humour and comedy and seriousness are not diametrically opposed as humour and comedy can have "serious implications and repercussions. Some forms of humour, as for example, those involving sexist assumptions about gender roles and identities, are far from inconsequential" (2008, 809). Thus, Meyer's (2000) and Lockyer and Pickering's (2008) observations suggest that joking can have serious social and cultural consequences depending on the topic of the joke².

Rape Jokes in context

Comedy and rape have a complex and long relationship. In the eighteenth century in Britain, rape jokes thrived "when progressive laws shifted the legal status of rape from a property

crime committed among men to an assault on a woman's body. The rape joke formed the reactionary backdrop to this shifting terrain" (Lara Cox 2015, 970; see also Simon Dickie 2011). Since then, from American comic George Carlin's 10-minute "rape can be funny" routine in 1990 to Australian comedian Jim Jefferies' rape jokes in his 'Freedumb' tour in 2016 to James Corden making a joke about Harvey Weinstein's alleged rape and sexual assault at an event in Los Angeles in 2017, rape jokes have continued to be prominent in Anglosphere cultural practices. Recent analysis of rape jokes suggests that they "are proliferating" (Katie Gentile 2017, 258) and "the rape joke" has become the "most-debated of humour genres" (Ellen Jones 2015).

Rape jokes told in the British context are particularly interesting. Brian Logan, the comedy critic for the British newspaper, *The Guardian*, has coined the term "new offensiveness" (2009) to describe contemporary comedy that has more in common with the misogynistic and racist comedy heard on the British comedy circuit in the 1970s (e.g. by Bernard Manning, Jim Davidson and Roy Chubby Brown) than the anti-sexist and anti-racist jokes of the alternative comedy movement of the 1980s. "New" is used to suggest a revival of such offensive comedy rather than a development of a new format or style of comedy. In his examination of this "new offensiveness", Leon Hunt (2010) draws on the comedy routines of Jimmy Carr and Frankie Boyle, both of whom have made rape jokes and argues that Jimmy Carr "seems more confident with rape than race as a stand-up" (2010, 183).

Rape jokes, like all types of jokes, do not exist in a vacuum – they are highly context-dependent and analyses of them should consider the broader contexts in which they take place (Mary Douglas 1978; Mahadev Apte 1985; Jennifer Hay 2000; Janet Holmes 2000; Susan Seizer 1997). In her analysis of internet rape-joke arguments, Elise Kramer argues that context "includes not only the immediate conversational surround but also interdiscursive links to other conversations as well as ideologies that implicitly guide speakers in their

production and consumption of humor” (2011, 138). These links exist at individual, institutional and structural levels, cyclically connecting micro- and macro-level processes. Rape jokes exist in everyday, micro-level, interactions, and assist in the production and maintenance of inequalities at the macro-level, for example, in education, employment, law and politics, which contributes to the creation of ideological frameworks (Michelle Bemiller and Rachel Zimmer Schneider 2010). These ideologies “feed back into individual level constructions of meaning, illustrating the connection between micro- and macro-level processes” (Bemiller and Zimmer Schneider 2010, 461). Jokes are also socio-politically important as they can assist individuals, groups and societies with examining themselves and dealing with, and recording, broader societal changes, attitudes, anxieties and uncertainties. Christopher Stone describes this function of humour as managing “social growing pains” (1972, 455) whilst Andy Medhurst (2007) refers to it as comedy’s “cultural thermometer” function.

Rape jokes and rape culture are closely interwoven. The term was first introduced by Susan Brownmiller (1975) as “rape-supportive culture”, we can understand “rape culture” as “the cultural practices that reproduce and justify the perpetration of sexual violence” (Carrie Rentschler 2014, 67). A range of communication acts, from catcalls to rape jokes contribute to rape culture (Rentschler 2014). Furthermore, Shannon Ridgway (2014) highlights the importance of jokes in rape culture arguing that rape culture refers to how we “collectively *think* about rape” which includes a range of cultural practices including “situations in which sexual assault, rape, and general violence are ignored, trivialized, normalized, or made into jokes” [emphasis in original].

Normalising Rape Jokes in mediascapes

In 1978, George Gerbner wrote, with some degree of alarm, that (Western) television was increasingly treating rape as a “normal” crime, akin to theft. Indeed, he observed, so much so that “rape has *even been made a topic of humour*” (1978, 48 emphasis added). For Beth Montemurro (2003), building on MacKinnon (1979, 52), humour has been a key way in which male sexual harassment of women has become trivialised. Heidi Mirza (2014) has observed there has always been a “rape culture”; cultures have always provided contexts where women are raped. What is notable in the contemporary cultural context is not that cultures where rape takes place exist, but that rape and sexual violence have become so normalised in and through our media and mediated culture.

Media provide a site of cultural circulation of discourses that have served to “normalise” or trivialise sexual violence towards women. News discourses position women as provocateurs or suggests that rape is “just sex” (Helen Benedict 1992), where sexualised language is used to describe female victims (Keith Soothill and Sylvia Walby 1991). Increasingly mainstream media embed rape as part of our cultural landscape. The British drama series, *Downton Abbey* (ITV), included a rape scene which for one critic was a “means to spice up a dull plot” (Bidisha in Cosslett and Bidisha, 2013). HBO’s highly popular *Game of Thrones* has become known for its departure from the books in its controversial rape (“that became consensual”) scenes (Erin Whitney 2014). Robin Thicke’s 2013 best-selling song “Blurred Lines” has become known as “the rape anthem” (Tanya Horeck 2014).

The year 2012 was branded the comedy industry’s “year of the rape joke” (Tricia Romano 2012). On open mic circuits in 2012 there were “20 comedians doing 20 rape jokes in one night” (Tanya Gold 2012). As social networks have provided sites where young feminist activists have sought to challenge “rape culture” (Rentschler 2014), so social media enable challenges, exposes and objections to rape “jokes”³. In 2012 during a performance at *The Laugh Factory* in Hollywood, Daniel Tosh replied to a heckler who called “rape jokes are

never funny!” by saying “Wouldn’t it be funny if that girl got raped by, like, five guys right now? Like right now? What if a bunch of guys just raped her ...” (see Katla McGlynn 2012; Nicholas Holm 2016; Raul Pérez and Viveca Greene 2016). The response was a “twitterstorm” but one which polarised around two debates: those positioned as humourless feminists and those protecting “free speech” (LindyWest 2012). This polarising of the debate in itself masks a set of power structures – is the only option really to be a humourless feminist or a defender of free speech? Rape “jokes” may create a twitterstorm and a stir. But what happens when they don’t, what happens when they become normalised, a standard part of acts? We see examples of this normalisation in comedians such as Jimmy Carr, Russell Brand, Reginald D Hunter, Edinburgh award winner Brendan Burns (Logan 2010). What happens online and on the comedy circuit clearly feeds back in to our mainstream media culture.

Academic research concerned with sexist humour has sought to assess the effects of rape jokes on individuals or groups. Psychologists have sought to measure effects of rape jokes on individuals and studies have demonstrated that where sexist assumptions are pre-existing, rape jokes and sexist humour are likely to reinforce a proclivity to rape (Tendayi Viki, Manuela Thomae, Amy Cullen, and Hannah Fernández 2007; Monica Romero-Sánchez, Mercedes Durán, Hugu Carretero-Dios, Jesus Megiás and Moya Miguel 2010). Thomas Ford, Erin Wentzel and Joli Lorion (2001) found that men are more tolerant of sexist events following exposure to sexist humour. Sexist humour has also been demonstrated to trivialise gender-based discrimination (Thomas Ford, Christie Boxer, Jacob Armstrong and Jessica Edel 2008) and can be used to express hostility to women (Kathryn Ryan and Jeanne Kanjorski 1998); and as a form of sexual harassment (John Pryor 1995). Men have been shown to be more likely to appreciate sexist humour than women (Ann Marie Love & Lambert Deckers 1989; James Neuliep 1987). Yet what this research doesn’t do is explore

why these jokes become jokes, and the kinds of rape that are acceptable to joke about, and those that aren't. It is the cultural context, generated in part through media discourse, which gives us cues to what is and is not acceptable. For example, can we imagine making jokes about women in the context of war being raped? This clearly seems abhorrent. Women are widely subject to rape as a weapon of war (yet this is often marginalised as a feature of war coverage). However, it is the context of rape in warfare, so the context of war, rather than the act of male rape per se, which makes the notion of this type of joke seem unacceptable. From comedy clubs, TV programmes and social media, to music videos and advertising rape, is increasingly normalised. It is part of our daily language of what is acceptable and part of that normalisation takes place through humour. We are directed to make sense of humour through reference to its context, and it is the mediated context of the humour which gives it its meaning.

Methodology

Ideational contexts matter, our epistemological positioning holds that it is the ideas that we hold about what reality looks like that serves to shape that reality; our perceptions shape and inform our actions. These contexts serve to position us culturally and legitimate and discursively normalise the limits of social and political acceptability and these discourses form the key component of our analysis. As noted above, our focus is not on the content of the joke per se, but the ways in which we as audiences and citizens are provided with media cues and contexts to think about the world around us. National UK newspapers remain a significant information source (Statista 2018). As such, our focus is on the ways in which UK newspapers report and discuss rape jokes in serious news. In so doing we build upon previous significant studies on sexual violence have explored the ways in which print media

play a central role in constructing and normalising male violence towards women in news coverage (e.g. Cindy Carter, 1998; Stewart Hegarty, Andrew Stewart, Inge Blockmans and Miranda Horvath et al, 2016).

In order to analyse the discursive and cultural normalisation of rape as a subject matter for jokes, we undertook a LexisNexis database search of all UK national daily newspapers⁴ over the last five years⁵, using the keywords “rape jokes”. Data collection considered all types of newspaper content from editorials and opinion pieces, to news articles, reviews and readers’ letters. The search was restricted to the last five years in order to focus the analysis on contemporary newspaper coverage of rape jokes, whilst also covering a sufficient time frame to allow recurrent discursive practices, and divergencies, to be identified.

Kramer outlines the intricacies involved in defining a “rape joke”:

... is a “rape joke” a joke that mentions rape? A joke that describes rape? A joke in which rape is the main plot element? A joke that does not mention rape but implicitly gestures towards it? Are jokes about paedophilia “rape jokes”? Are jokes about statutory rape “rape jokes”? (2011, 139)

As we are interested in the discursive newspaper coverage and arguments surrounding rape jokes rather than the jokes themselves, in agreement with Kramer (2011), we do not consider such ambiguity problematic. Our focus here is not how newspaper discourses classify jokes into “rape jokes” and “not rape jokes”, but what newspaper discourse does with these categories once they have been identified and confirmed. The LexisNexis search returned a total of 365 items, with a total of 359 once duplicates had been removed.

Thematic analysis (Jodi Aronson 1994; Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke 2006) was used to disassemble the newspaper items identified in the data collection. Thematic analysis is a “method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and

Clarke 2006, 79) and focuses on “patterns of living and/or behaviour” (Aronson 1994) and thus facilitated insight into the discursive processes involved in the newspaper construction of rape jokes.

One of the most striking aspects of the research was that despite using the search term “rape joke” and not specifying gender, our coverage only returned jokes about women being subject to rape. There was not a single joke reported that referred to male rape. We also noticed how it was predominantly white male comedians who were being reported as causing the outrage, and being given space to defend their actions. The category of woman fell in to the generic assumed homogenising subject of “woman”. This might also reinforce the notion that the telling of “rape jokes” is predominantly something which is mainly carried out by white men, which was reflected in our findings. From this observation, five themes were further inductively (Clive Seale 2018) identified in the newspaper discourse and listed in order of their prominence: 1) individual focus: retelling the joke; 2) defending the joke; 3) apologies; 4) women making rape jokes; and 5) structural context: linking rape jokes with other sexual assaults. It is to these themes that we now turn.

Individual focus: Re-Telling the Joke

The main way in which tabloids reported on rape jokes was to focus on the row that had emerged as a result of the telling of the rape joke. However, in each instance where they reported moral outrage, they served to legitimate the joke by repeating it in its entirety and allowing the speaker of the joke the space either to apologise or defend their joke. For example, in the case of Dapper Laughs, his joke was repeated in each article, alongside a quote from him saying “I did not make a joke about rape. My comments were taken out of context” (*Daily Mirror* 24/09/2015)⁶. It is difficult to see how Laughs’ joke was anything

other than about rape given that part of the controversy stemmed from him saying that an audience member was “gagging for rape” and yet, the framing of the coverage allowed for a space where the joke was repeated (and so legitimated) and defensible (with the space for apology being given). The tabloids followed a fairly standard format in this regard: state there was a row; repeat the joke; allow the teller of the joke to explain themselves.

In the *Daily Mirror*, the main focus of the articles was who had caused a row by saying or tweeting rape jokes [Dapper Laughs (16/02/15; 9/6/15), England cricketer Graeme Swann (19/12/13) and Liverpool police (2/11/15)]. In each of the cases the rape joke was repeated and reprinted in the press (e.g. 10/11/2014). Only one of these articles included a quote from a charity detailing the numbers of women who had been subjected to sexual violence (19/12/13) and yet despite the content and space allowed in this one item to articulate concerns, the article still concluded with details of a forthcoming Dapper Laughs gig alongside ticket price and booking details. The *Mail Online* followed suit in advertising Dapper Laughs’ forthcoming shows in an article that discussed the outrage that he caused (21/04/15). This free publicity and implied support was also evident in other *Mail Online* articles, such as the report which discussed Australian comedian Ray Badran’s premier of his show which based on his experiences of, and reflections on, the controversy caused by him telling a rape joke the previous year. The article reports on the controversy while repeating the offending joke in full (22/05/2016). The general tenor of articles in the tabloids was about reporting the outrage that had followed as a consequence of rape jokes being made by a particular comedian, celebrity or institution, but in each case the rape joke was repeated and reprinted in full, implying support for the joke and by extension legitimation.

Similarly, the focus in the quality press was also on repeating the jokes and allowing the joke teller to explain the joke. This was a strategy repeatedly adopted by *The Independent* when reporting rape jokes told specifically by celebrities such as James Blunt (30/01/2015) and

Dapper Laughs (10/11/2014, 12/11/2014, 13/11/2014, 14/11/2014; and *The Times* 24/10/2015). This emphasis and framing reifies the teller and the content, rather than offering a critique of the kind of damage that occurs as a consequence of male sexual violence towards women. In essence, by giving a platform to both the joke and the defence of the joke (as noted below) newspaper discourse allows and provides justification of the joke and the wider cultural views and attitudes that permit the telling of such jokes.

Defending the Joke

In the tabloid articles space was provided for the speaker of the joke to also define the joke or defend the right to make such jokes. *The Sun*, under the heading “Pair’s Brand Aid”, reported Russel Brand defending comedians Dane Cook and Daniel Tosh by quoting him saying “we should remember they are comedians” (30/07/2012). In an editorial piece, the tabloid’s position was made clear: “Outrage over comedians is based on the stupid idea that we can stop certain behaviour if we can stop joking about it. As if banning rape jokes will end rape” (*The Sun* 05/08/2015).

Occasionally tabloid articles provided space for Charities and Women’s groups concerned with sexual violence to have voice. In most instances however, the charity was called upon for a reaction rather than framers of the story. For example, Rape Crisis were quoted as saying, “we are appalled that Graeme Swann equates a cricket match with rape” (*Daily Star* 19/12/2013). In most of these articles no links were made to the wider social context that was being legitimated through the reproduction of such jokes. This was also evident in the quality newspaper, *The Times*, which repeated a rape joke made by Rodrigo Duterte who was running for election as president in the Philippines. It is reported that he “rejected criticism from women’s groups, the Church, and the ambassadors of Australia and the United States

but eventually conceded: ‘Sometimes my mouth can get the better of me. I am a man of many flaws and contradictions’” (26/04/2016).

In the quality press, defences of rape jokes sometimes involved both the joker teller and formal representation and were based on the receiver of the joke misunderstanding the joke. In an article headlined “Students says rape threat was ‘Fifty Shades’ joke”, *The Daily Telegraph* reports that the joke teller “claimed his remarks were a misunderstood joke inspired by the erotic novel”, reinforced later in the article by the defending counsel repeating that the student thought that he was “enjoying some sort of joke along the lines of the Fifty Shades of Grey Book” with the plaintiff (01/12/2015; see also *The Times* 01/12/2015). The framing of these stories in this way not only reifies the teller and reinforces the gendered power relations, as it also problematically serves to marginalise and silence the voices of those [women] who may be on the receiving end of such violence.

Apologies

Voice was more likely to be given to the proponents of the rape jokes, as they were given space to apologise for these jokes. Apologies were stated in official language, appearing to mirror press releases. In response to Merseyside Police making a rape joke via Twitter we are simply told “the police force later tweeted ‘we would like to apologise’” (*Daily Mirror* 02/11/2015). Reporting on the same incident, *The Daily Telegraph* states that “Merseyside Police have apologised after appearing to joke about rape ... After criticism, the force deleted the tweets and promised to investigate ‘inappropriate use’ of its account” (02/11/2015; see also *The Times* 02/11/2015). *The Mail Online* also included the apology and reported the next day that the employee had “left the force ‘by mutual consent’” (02/11/2015). *The Guardian* included a report which detailed a response from an eBay spokesperson following rape joke

slogan T-shirts being sold on its website that read “We don’t allow inappropriate material on the site ... We want to keep eBay a safe place” (24/09/2013). Although this is not a direct apology, there is acknowledgement that the T-shirts were problematic. What the majority of these reports and coverage did not do, however, was link the joke to wider contexts of sexual violence.

Some articles reported on cases where the joke teller refused to apologise for making a rape joke. For example, the *Mail Online* reported how Bachelorette contestant Ryan McDill refused to apologise for a rape joke made towards a fellow male contestant (21/05/2015)⁷. McDill is reported as saying “People need to get off their high horse. It was awesome and entertaining” and later in the report disputes the view that “the rape line” was a rape joke, arguing instead that it was “meant to express his desire to ‘destroy’ his reality show rival”. Bollywood actor Salman Khan was not reported as apologising for making a rape joke, rather his “representatives” outlined that the “comments has been meant as a joke” and his father “apologised on his behalf, urging his son’s legions of fans to forgive him” (*The Times* 22/06/2016). But it was noticeable that apologies were mainly provided by institutions and official figures, rather than the comedians themselves. Here then the male protagonist is distanced from the joke and the offense that is caused; the “problem” is that of the receiver rather than the teller. When the teller is male, making jokes about male sexual violence, we see institutions again reinforcing gendered power relations by enabling this distancing to occur.

Women making rape jokes

The tabloid press produced articles about only two women making rape jokes. Lee-Ann Rimes (*Mail Online* 28/08/14) and Amy Schumer were the two women who had made such

jokes. Similar to the way in which articles about male rape jokes were positioned, the jokes made by women were also framed as “fury”/“outrage” stories that had provoked a row “Schumer gag gaffe” (*The Sun* 09/07/15). While *The Sun* repeated both jokes, the *Mail Online* chose to report on and repeat the joke made by “tasteless” Jennifer Lawrence and Brandi Glanville (22/05/14), but not by a Masterchef contestant or Lena Durham’s TV character⁸.

What was noticeably missing in this reportage is an understanding of the nuanced ways in which structurally disadvantaged groups use humour differently. The tabloids simply treated men and women’s rape jokes in a gender-blind way, suggesting no difference between them. As Nancy Fraser (2013) has argued to be gender blind, is not to be gender neutral. In framing stories in a “gender blind” way, to position women who make rape jokes in the same manner as men who make rape jokes, is to deny the structural inequalities that mean that some women start from different positions when making jokes or comments about rape. Whereas masculine comedy around rape comes from a position of structural power and dominance, women’s humour can come from a place which seeks to reject this structural positioning. For example, *The Guardian* (10/06/2016) repeats a rape joke by Emma Cooper who described her experience and noted that her rapist had spelled the word “beautiful” wrongly. Her joke being “I want a smart rapist who can spell words like ‘communication’, ‘consent’ and coercion”. In this joke then Cooper reverses and challenges the power structures that legitimate rape, rather than reinforcing and normalising them. She uses humour to unpack experiences and raise questions about rape, rather than to legitimate it. *The Guardian* produced a detailed report on how some rape survivors found the telling of rape jokes by other women therapeutic (10/06/2016) as well as reporting on the way in which Adrienne Truscott’s show, *Asking for It: A One-Lady Rape About Comedy Starting Her Pussy and Little Else*, delivered a series of rape jokes where she was applauded “in her willingness to

take on the structural misogyny of comedy itself, set a new standard in comic bravery” (*The Guardian* 16/04/16; see also 20/08/2013, 01/01/2014, 15/05/2014). Similarly, *The Independent* reported on the “witty, occasionally dazzling take-down of the rape joke” in Adrienne Truscott’s show (01/11/2013). This operates in contrast to the coverage of male rape jokes which were repeated in full. Male rape jokes tellers were given space to apologise and defend their actions, while the audience was positioned to sympathise with the male teller. In contrast, where women were discussed as tellers of rape jokes, their jokes were not repeated in full. Women were remarked upon in feminised and essentialist terms; rather than news coverage interrogating the context that has led to the need for them to make such jokes in the first place.

Structural context: Linking Rape Jokes with other Sexual Assaults

Least common in our data was the occasional focus on rape culture, rather than the individual making the joke. This did not occur in the tabloids, but in the broadsheets we saw some coverage of structural issues: sexual violence; sexual harassment; and sexism. For example, *The Guardian* reported the damage that rape culture discourse can do: “‘Locker room talk’ isn’t harmless - it normalizes rape culture; words matter Donald Trump. Choosing to joke about causing harm to women plays in to a larger narrative where it’s ok to go from words to deeds” (*The Guardian* 11/10/2016).

The Guardian was quite clear in its situation of rape jokes in a wider problematic context. Each of these articles that referred to rape jokes, did not do so in the salacious, repetitive ways that evident in tabloid coverage. Rather, when *The Guardian* was covering rape jokes, they were situated within articles which highlighted and discussed the problems of sexual harassment, lad culture (in Universities, in film and popular culture, in advertising and in workplace contexts), the problems of sexual harassment and violence towards women both

on and offline and the ways in which normalising these jokes were contributory to a wider emergent culture. *The Independent* adopted a similar style of reporting with headlines such as “The sexist LSE rugby club flyer is just the tip of the university iceberg” (06/11/2014) and “Sites like Uni Lad only act to support our everyday rape culture. Rape jokes only make fun of victims who have trouble being believed in the first place – it’s not ‘banter’, it’s offensive” (30/11/2012). *The Times* also ran similar stories, with headlines such as “Sex harassment on rise, says Oxford college head” (14/05/2015) and “Bad education sex on campus and the rise of the ‘Uni Lad’” (09/05/2015). Some of the cultural consequences of this normalisation were drawn attention to. A charity representative is reported as saying “my worry is that if girls and young women are told enough times rape is something to joke about then if it happens to them they won’t feel they are being taken seriously if they report it” (*The Independent* 24/09/2015). While these types of discussion of the wider context of rape jokes and the consequences of this kind of culture did occur, they were relatively rare in our data, suggesting that to critique the context that gives rise to rape jokes is not really something that we as an audience are invited to do.

Discussion

As discussed in the Introduction, responses to the student event where a rape joke was told raised for us a set of questions about the ways in which our media play a role in reinforcing and normalising gender roles and expectations. It was particularly noteworthy that the coverage of rape jokes fell in to predominantly two categories: where men were making jokes about raping women; and where women were using humour to explore their subject or their experiences of rape. The majority of the newspaper coverage was in the former category. In this sense, while there are examples of women using humour to explore their experiences of

rape (such as Hannah Gadsby's powerful stand up show *Nanette*) the majority of news reporting nonetheless reinforced the notion that it was white men that predominantly told rape jokes, reliant on a single unified and essentialised category of woman.

There was however a notable difference between the ways in which men and women used rape in comedy. What our coverage showed was that where men had made rape jokes, this was used in ways to reinforce patriarchal power structures. As Brownmiller notes 'From prehistoric times to the present ... rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear' (Brownmiller, 1975:15). This assertion of masculine dominance was reinforced through the reification, repetition and defence of the joke. In contrast, where women had used humour to explore the issue of rape, this was given far less prominence, coverage or discussion. The approach of women using this humour was also qualitatively different from the male comedians who were reported. As Kramer observes, in relation to rape, feminist theorising and activism involved raising awareness that "(i) it was about power, not sex; (ii) women who were raped has not been 'asking for it', consciously or subconsciously ... (iii) rape was a serious scourge of humanity, not a trivial laughing matter" (2011, 159). Yet the minimal coverage of women using humour to explore this issue reinforced the point that we do not as a mainstream really want to reflect upon or dispel the rape 'myths' that inform our culture.

Feminist theorising draws our attention to the way that politics takes place in all areas of life, in everyday interactions and particularly in our cultural context (cf. Sara Ahmed 2017; Sarah Banet-Weiser; 2018). We argue that these jokes function not simply as "irony" but as everyday expressions of "new sexism". Where we are invited to laugh knowingly at what we had once labelled sexist (Angela McRobbie 2004, 259). Media coverage which repeats jokes told by male comedians encourages an audience response to this "ironic" manner. That men

who make rape jokes are given space to defend their actions and offer apologies, simply reinforces the sense that male sexual violence towards women is something that is a legitimate topic of humour, rather than something we as a society should be seriously addressing.

Conclusion

We began this research to reflect on a problem as to why rape jokes (jokes about male sexual violence towards women) are viewed by some as funny, and legitimate sources of humour. Given that media “shape the limits of our imagination” and set the context in which our cultural norms and values are created and legitimated (cf. Lewis, 2013), the aim of this article has been to reflect upon and explore the mediated context which gives rise to a culture where male sexual violence towards women is constructed as a topic of humour.

In our contemporary climate, we (hope very much) we would not see racist or homophobic jokes reprinted in full, nor witness the teller of said joke defend their actions. However, our analysis of newspaper coverage reveals that media discourse around rape jokes is still largely framed in ways that reinforces white patriarchal masculinity and existing gendered power relations. Male comedians used rape jokes to reinforce patriarchal relations. Newspaper coverage broadly mirrored this approach. We found that it was mainly in the few cases where women had used humour to explore male sexual violence, only then was there discussion about the impact of rape on women’s lives. The majority of coverage was concerned with male tellers of rape jokes and allowed the joke to be repeated, defended and apologised for, which in turn serves to normalise rape as a subject of humour, rather than question its existence, contributing to, rather than challenging, rape culture and gendered power relations and structures of privilege.

Humour does not exist in isolation from its cultural context, and our key argument is that media play a critical role in establishing and normalising what counts as “humour”. More fundamentally, media also play a role in promoting dominant social norms and values. In the light of the Harvey Weinstein scandal and Tarana Burke’s subsequently inspired #MeToo campaign, it is therefore even more pertinent to consider the ways in which male sexual harassment and abuse of women is normalised and legitimated through humour, and how media reporting of rape jokes discursively construct, normalise and legitimate our social norms and cultural values.

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Notes

¹ *Question Time* is a British topical debate programme where a panel of politicians and public figures answer questions from a studio audience consisting of members of the public broadcast on BBC since 1979.

² A wide range of topics are the subject of jokes and jokes are "frequently classified based on their content" (Attardo 2014, 417). For example, jokes are classified on the identity of the target of the joke, as in ethnic jokes (Irish jokes, Polish jokes, Jewish jokes) and lawyer jokes, or on specific life events (wedding jokes, disaster jokes, death jokes), or on violent acts, from war and Holocaust jokes, through to the focus of this paper, rape jokes.

³ Social networking sites, such as Tumblr and Twitter, use humour to ridicule, expose and critique perceptions of sexual assault and harassment. For example, posters on the Twitter site #safetytipsforwomen used humour to "challenge the site's focus on women's responsibility for sexual violence, rather than perpetrators" and challenged victim-blaming rhetoric employed on the site (Rentschler 2014, 70).

⁴ Data collection included the following UK newspaper titles: *The Sun*; *The Mail Online*; *Daily Express*; *Daily Star*; *Daily Mirror*; *The Telegraph*; *The Guardian*; *The Independent*; *The Times*.

⁵ The data collection period spanned 27/04/2012-27/04/2017.

⁶ In October 2014, comedian Dapper Laughs (Daniel O'Reilly) joked about rape at a London gig. In his retort to criticisms from within the comedy industry that his *Dapper Laughs: On the Pull* (ITV 2014) show had “helped create a rapists’ almanac” (Lee Kern 2014), he claimed that a female audience member was “gagging for rape. We’ll have a chat about it afterwards. Do you want to come backstage after? Bring two of your mates, you’ll need them” (Jess Denham 2014).

⁷ *Bachelorette* is an American dating and relationship reality television series broadcast on ABC that debuted in 2003.

⁸ *MasterChef* is a British television competitive cooking programme broadcast on BBC since 1990.