

## The Personal Is Political for Me(n)too: Online Discourse Surrounding Male Victims of Sexual Assault

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As hashtag feminist campaigns such as #MeToo, #NotOkay, and #YesAllWomen have shown, social media are powerful discursive spaces for conversations on gender inequities and eventually generate discursive shifts. The current study asks whether social media play the same role for *male* victims of sexual assault, who challenge hegemonic conventions according to which “real” men cannot be raped/harassed by disclosing their experiences online. To answer this question, a thematic analysis was conducted, comprising 2,176 online comments to 40 self-disclosures of men published during the #MeToo and #WhyIDidntReport campaigns in Israel. A vast majority of the comments contested traditional stereotypes of gender order and gender hegemony and suggested alternative notions of manhood. All in all, the findings lead to cautious optimism in regard to the role of social media in legitimizing male victimization and challenging male rape myths.

*Keywords: sexual assault, #MeToo, male victimization, social support, online comments*

In recent years, the feminist movement has used the power of social media to fight gender inequalities (Myles, 2019). Using a “hashtagged” word or phrase that mobilizes individuals into collective action (Ofori-Parku & Moscato, 2018), hashtag feminist campaigns have leveraged the Internet as a counterpublic sphere, where victims of inequality can coexist, express and share personal experiences, and receive attention and validation (Dixon, 2014, p. 34).

Despite aiming to improve women’s social status, some of these campaigns, especially those focused on sexual victimization, have also been joined by men, who shared their own experiences facing sexual assault and misconduct (PettyJohn, Muzzey, Maas, & Mccauley, 2019; Storer & Rodriguez, 2020). This act is not self-evident: Male victimization is inconsistent with traditional gender norms and expectations, which identify between masculinity and traits like strength, superiority, and control (Easton, 2014; Stemple & Meyer, 2014). As a result, men who experience sexual victimization may not reveal their injuries for fear of being ridiculed as weak and “girly” (Bogen, Mulla, Haikalis, & Orchowski, 2020).

Thus, the question arises as to what is the social discourse surrounding men who challenge patriarchal conventions by disclosing their victimization? What are the social reactions they evoke? Do men’s

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online self-disclosures of sexual victimization also elicit solidarity, recognition, and legitimization (Lokot, 2018)? The current study seeks to answer these questions through a thematic analysis of 2,176 online comments to 40 self-disclosures of men published during the #MeToo and #WhyIDidntReport campaigns in Israel (October 2017 and 2018, respectively).

Even with a recent increase in literature focused on male victims of sexual assault, there is still a significant lack of research on this population both online and offline (Donne et al., 2017; Hawkins, Mullet, Brown, Eggleston, & Gardenhire, 2019). Against this backdrop, and given (a) that social networks play key roles in perpetuating and sustaining values in public discourse (Chadwick, 2017; Van Dijck, Poell, & De Waal, 2018) and (b) that more and more victims of sexual assault are turning to social networks to disclose their experiences (Fileborn, 2017; O'Neill, 2018), the current study seeks to reveal the gendered conventions that are reflected in online commenting on male sexual victimization.

### **Masculinities, Rape Myths, and Male Sexual Victimization**

Under patriarchy, power has always been central to the formation of masculine identity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). An abundant literature demonstrates how "the global dominance of men over women" (Connell, 1987, p. 183) has been constructed through norms, social structures, institutions, and practices. Within this culture of "hegemonic masculinities" (Connell, 1995), men are expected to be independent and self-reliant, active, assertive, dominant, and strong. Traits such as submissiveness, emotionality, and compliance are not consistent with social norms regarding masculinity, and "real" men are not supposed to hold them (Bates, Kaye, Pennington, & Hamlin, 2019; Hlavka, 2017; Javaid, 2017, 2018).

This discourse inherently contains assumptions, values, and norms about male sexuality and, therefore, has implications for men's sexual behavior, inclusive of violent sexual acts (Jewkes & Morrell, 2017, p. 549). Cultures that embrace stereotyped beliefs or myths about the dominant position of men and the subordination of women tend to perceive male-on-female sexual assault as an inevitable outgrowth of preordained differences between the sexes, normalize and naturalize female sexual passivity, and justify male sexual assault (Gavey & Senn, 2014). These perceptions are also referred to as "rape myths" (i.e., the stereotyped beliefs about rape, rapists, and rape victims, focusing on the culpability of the latter and illegitimacy of rape as a serious crime, Burt, 1980; Ryan, 2019).

These concepts of hegemonic masculinity and rape culture illustrate how a glorified version of masculinity works to systematically subjugate and oppress women. But some forms of masculinities are themselves subordinated by the hegemonic practice, as in the case of male victims of sexual assault (Javaid, 2017). In a culture that emphasizes male superiority and dominance, male rape victims may be judged to have failed as men for not fighting off their aggressors (Hlavka, 2017). In addition, based on the stereotype that "men are in a constant state of readiness to accept any sexual opportunity" (Clements-Schreiber & Rempel, 1995, p. 199), male rape victims are often assumed to be less affected by sexual assault than women (Alaggia, Collin-Vézina, & Lateef, 2019) and less deserving of sympathy and assistance (Graham, 2006).

In sum, *male* rape myths also exist, and they emanate from the same patriarchal structure as female rape myths (Lowe & Rogers, 2017; Turchik & Edwards, 2012). These myths not only reduce the offender's responsibility but also affect men's understanding and reaffirmation of their own sense of (masculine) identity (Javaid, 2016; Lowe & Balfour, 2015; Mulder, Pemberton, & Vingerhoets, 2020). Norms of masculinity serve to ascribe blame to male victims of sexual assault. They aim to dismiss, doubt, or silence male victims and hinder them from seeking formal support services (Petersson & Plantin, 2019). Above all, this "secondary victimization" (Lowe & Rogers, 2017, p. 38) causes male victims of sexual assault to feel isolated and less legitimate than their female counterparts (Javaid, 2016, 2017). It is not surprising, then, that men are less likely to disclose their victimization compared with women (Sivagurunathan, Orchard, Macdermid, & Evans, 2019).

### **Disclosing Sexual Victimization in Offline Settings**

In addition to psychological symptoms such as low self-esteem, depression, antisocial behavior, and self-harm (Krahé & Berger, 2017; Peter-Hagene & Ullman, 2016; Talmon & Ginzburg, 2018; Ullman, 2016), victims of sexual assault need to cope with possible social responses to the disclosures of their injuries. These responses can be divided into positive and negative reactions, each of which has opposing effects on the victim's well-being. While positive reactions that provide victims with support, empathy, encouragement, and a sense of belonging are linked to better recovery, negative reactions such as victim-blaming or denial exacerbate the negative symptoms of the injury and hamper recovery (Dworkin, Newton, & Allen, 2018; Orchowski, Untied, & Gidycz, 2013; Peter-Hagene & Ullman, 2016). Given that regaining a sense of control over one's experience is a vital component of recovery following trauma (Frazier, 2003), disclosure can also help victims conceptualize their experiences and sense personal growth (Sorsoli, Kia-Keating, & Grossman, 2008).

With few exceptions (e.g., Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003; Sauzier, 1989), most studies comparing men and women have indicated that women appear to be more likely to disclose sexual assault than men (Alaggia et al., 2019; Lev-Wiesel & First, 2018; O'Leary & Barber, 2008). Ullman and Filipas (2005) found that men were not only less likely than women to have disclosed their victimization but also less likely to have encountered positive reactions to this disclosure. Similarly, Davies and Rogers (2006) illustrated how male victims tend to be more blamed by others for their assaults compared with women.

Consequently, deciding whether to disclose the injury to others is often a long, sensitive, and complicated process for both sexes (Collin-Vézina, de la Sablonnière-Griffin, Palmer, & Milne, 2015), characterized by uncertainty about who can be trusted, what the consequences will be, and the benefits of reporting (Ullman, 2011).

However, in-depth interviews with male victims of sexual assault indicate that normative expectations about masculinity act as additional disclosure and help-seeking barriers (Easton, Saltzman, & Willis, 2014). Most male victims of sexual assault feel shame and guilt for not being "tough enough" to protect themselves, in contrast with what is expected from "real men," and express fear of being ridiculed as weak, inadequate, or feminine (Holmes, Offer, & Wailer, 1997, p. 78). Additional factors that impede

disclosure in men are fear of being viewed as homosexual and concern about becoming abusers themselves (Alaggia et al., 2019).

Notwithstanding these multiple obstacles, the rise of digital technologies and social media has created new venues for victims of sexual assault to connect to others and disclose their experiences and feelings.

### **Disclosing Sexual Victimization in Online Settings**

Unlike “offline” face-to-face interactions, forcing the victim to deal directly with the recipient’s response, online media benefit from a-synchronicity (i.e., the victim’s ability to choose the point in time at which he/she will read the responses to his/her self-disclosure) and possible anonymity, thus potentially allow disclosers to avoid direct negative reactions (Andalibi, Haimson, De Choudhury, & Forte, 2018; Lowenstein-Barkai, 2020; Gundersen & Zaleski, 2021). However, in recent years, the feminist movement has sought to raise awareness of sexual offenses precisely through *public* and *overt* disclosures of the victims’ experiences. Feminist hashtag campaigns such as #MeToo, #NotOkay, and #WhyIDidntReport encourage self-disclosure of sexual victimization on social networks as a way to confront rape myths and to “shift the blame away from the individual to the society that made sexual harassment, assault, and rape both possible and permissible” (Lanius, 2019, p. 418).

While self-disclosure of sexual victimhood is often silenced and stigmatized (Gallagher, Stowell, Parker, & Foucault, 2019), studies analyzing the social discourse surrounding hashtag feminist campaigns have indeed suggested that these campaigns provide victims of sexual assault with recognition, legitimacy, and power (Myles, 2019; Stubbs-Richardson, Rader, & Cosby, 2018) and advocate against rape culture (Keller, Mendes, & Ringrose, 2016; Sills et al., 2016).

The main conclusion emerging from this strand of literature is that the digitized narratives of victims who disclose their injuries online connect the issues of women’s rights and gender justice with experiences familiar to many, offering them a sense of solidarity and creating a counterpublic sphere through which sexual assault is known and felt (Lokot, 2018; Mendes, Keller, & Ringrose, 2018). However, much less is known about the social discourse surrounding male online disclosure of sexual victimization. Much like the general literature on male sexual victimization, which is significantly less prevalent than that of women’s (Pettersson & Plantin, 2019), online self-disclosures of men have rarely been studied. This lacuna might stem from relatively low prevalence of men’s disclosures compared with women’s,<sup>1</sup> but may also derive from societal views linking sexual victimization with femininity (Javaid, 2018).

The few existing studies analyzing online self-disclosures of male victims of sexual assault have focused almost exclusively on the discourse reflected by the disclosers rather than the discourse surrounding

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<sup>1</sup>There are no exact figures on the proportion of male victims among the victims who have disclosed online, but a textual and demographic analysis of 11,935 U.S.-based tweets that included the hashtag #MeToo found that the proportion of men who disclosed their victimization in these tweets was 10.6%—similar to the proportion of men who have been victims of sexual assault in the general U.S. population (Modrek & Chakalov, 2019).

the social acceptance of their victimization (see Hawkins et al., 2019; Purnell, 2019). The present study aims at filling this void by analyzing 2,176 Twitter and Facebook comments following online self-disclosures of 40 male victims of sexual assault in Israel. In doing so, we seek (a) to increase research attention to male victimization and (b) to explore the role played by social media in reflecting contemporary masculinities in general and male victimization conceptions in particular.

## **Materials and Methods**

### ***Background***

The research environment is the Israeli society, which has experienced significant changes in the construction of masculinity like other Western democracies (Israeli & Rossman-Stolman, 2015). In the first decades after the founding of the state of Israel (1948), the glorified image of the macho Zionist warrior served as a pivotal force in forming masculine identities (Hirsch & Grosswirth-Kachtan, 2017; Sasson-Levy, 2011). However, since the 1970s, global democratization processes, particularly the intensification of antimilitarism as well as the rise of the feminist movement, have permeated Israeli society, offering alternative images of masculinity: softer and more reflexive, liberated from the traditional macho image (Perez & Sasson-Levy, 2015). While these new forms did not dominate Israeli society, they have become more accepted and acknowledged, gaining popularity especially among younger generations (Almog, 2004).

In the same way, feminist hashtag protests have not overpowered Israel, where the rate of Internet users in general and social media in particular is among the highest in the world (Pew Research Center, 2019). The two most prominent campaigns to receive wide public attention and participation in Israel are the #MeToo (October 2017) and #WhyIDidntReport (October 2018) campaigns. Both encouraged victims of sexual assault to share their personal stories online. The #MeToo campaign has had about 85,000 mentions on Israeli websites and social media—about a third of which are accounted for by self-disclosures of victims. One-tenth of these self-disclosures were published by men (Vigo, 2019). The hashtag #WhyIDidntReport has produced less publicity on social networks compared with the #MeToo campaign, but the weight of Israeli men disclosed within it has been higher (about 20% of all self-disclosures; Liel & Nusbaum, 2018).

### ***Data Collection***

In light of the large number of posts and tweets with the hashtags #MeToo and #WhyIDidntReport and the need to focus on self-disclosures of male victims only, the sampling method consisted of several steps. First, through a search engine of the Vigo media monitoring company, which monitors data from public accounts of Israeli users of social media, a search of the hashtags #MeToo and #WhyIDidntReport (in Hebrew and English) was conducted on Twitter and Facebook social networks for the first two weeks of each campaign (October 16–October 29, 2017, and September 30–October 13, 2018, respectively). Facebook and Twitter were selected for analysis since they are the most used social networks in Israel in general (Statscounter, 2021), as well as the most used social networks for disclosing experiences of sexual victimization as part of the #MeToo and #WhyIDidntReport campaigns in particular (Vigo, 2019). This initial search yielded 8,529 results from both networks. Then, all results that were not self-disclosures of men

(e.g., hashtags only with no additional text, jokes, trolling, and self-disclosures of women) were removed from the data set.

The identification of a disclosure as written by a man/woman was made possible because of a grammatical difference in Hebrew between masculine and feminine forms (which relates to the gender of the writer/speaker). Self-disclosures that described experiences of child sexual abuse were also removed because of the young age of the victims, which is likely to affect the nature of social reactions they evoke. Although self-disclosures of sexual assault are also published in public groups (for example, feminist groups or dedicated support groups), all self-disclosures on which this study is based have been retrieved from private (public) accounts only to avoid bias over the nature of responders in such groups (who are likely to express more acceptance and empathy toward the disclosers).

At the end of the filtering process, there were 153 self-disclosures of male victims left (112 from Facebook and 41 from Twitter), which generated 8,365 user comments, including threads, all of them referring textually and/or visually to the disclosure content. Given the qualitative nature of the study, which necessitates a manageable sample size to promote an in-depth analysis, 40 self-disclosures (out of 153) were randomly selected for analysis as follows: First, each of the 153 self-disclosures was given a sequential number based on publication date and hour. Then, 40 of the 153 cases (29 from Facebook and 11 from Twitter) were randomly selected using a Python script. These 40 self-disclosures generated 2,176 user comments, which constitute the research population.

### ***Procedure***

A thematic analysis approach was employed to analyze the findings. We followed the six phases of thematic analysis presented by Braun and Clarke (2006): becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

To become familiar with the data, the author and two research assistants (male and female undergraduate students who had previously experienced content and thematic analysis) read and reread together all the online comments in the data set. An initial coding frame was developed, informed by the existing literature on social reactions to self-disclosures of sexual victimization (Dworkin, Newton, & Allen, 2018; Orchowski, Untied, & Gidycz, 2013; Peter-Hagene & Ullman, 2016). Consequently, the coding frame was based on two main categories: positive versus negative reactions, each of which included four subcategories. Positive reactions comprised sympathy and empathy, trust, encouragement, and a sense of belonging. Negative reactions comprised victim-blaming, victim's story denial, mocking/insulting, and trivialization. Every comment was coded. In cases where a comment didn't match any of the categories, it was classified as "other."

During the first phase of the coding process, the three evaluators coded 100 comments together. Discrepancies among them were discussed until a consensus was reached. Next, all three evaluators coded 500 identical comments independently. Cronbach's alpha values were calculated, which ranged between .89 ("other") to .96 (victim blaming). Then, the two research assistants coded the remaining 1,546 comments. Table 1 summarizes the frequency and values of Cronbach's alpha for each category. All comments were

written in Hebrew. The examples presented in this article are reproduced verbatim, including misspellings, grammar errors, and abbreviations.

**Table 1. Frequencies and Cronbach's Alpha Values of the Coding Framework.<sup>2</sup>**

Category	Subcategory	Example	Frequency (%)	Cronbach's Alpha
Positive reactions	Sympathy and empathy	"Feeling your pain, returning the love" (personal communication, October 18, 2017)	63.5%	0.93
	Compliment and encouragement	"Thanks for sharing. You are a very brave man!! A superhero" (personal communication, October 20, 2017)	48%	0.91
	Trust	"I believe you. Don't blame yourself for freezing. That's a normal reaction" (personal communication, October 4, 2018)	19%	0.93
	A sense of belonging	"I'm by your side. You are not alone" (personal communication, October 1, 2018)  "So sad. It happens to so many men" (personal communication, October 22, 2017)	7%	0.92
Negative reactions	Victim-blaming	"why did you meet with him if you suspected his motives?" (personal communication, October 7, 2018)	1.8%	0.96
	Victim's story denial	"In my opinion, this story is cheap and sucks" (personal communication, October 23, 2017)	2%	0.93
	Mocking/insulting	"Find another way to gain attention" (personal communication, October 9, 2018)	0.8%	0.91

<sup>2</sup>All citations are not retrievable and are attributed as "personal communications."

Trivialization	"Not that I justify or anything but this trend creates an inflation of stories and harms real victims" (personal communication, October 17, 2017)	0.2%	0.90
Other	"If I were you, I would have waited for him in a dark corner and break all his bones" (personal communication, October 1, 2018)	12.5%	0.89
	"Publish his name and save others!" (personal communication, October 2, 2018)		

After dense coding, the data set was collated into potential themes. Data were analyzed by the author and the research assistants until new themes did not continue to emerge and saturation was reached. The researchers worked independently in the identifications of themes, and several face-to-face meetings took place to discuss them until a comprehensive understanding about the underlying patterns within the data had emerged. After a final review, these themes with definitions were identified and named. Examples were extracted for presentation in the report of the full thematic analysis to illustrate each theme.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

The current study notes the ethical dilemmas involved in social media data in general and in exploring sensitive issues such as sexual victimization in particular (Moreno, Goniu, Moreno, & Diekema, 2013). Hence, the data collection procedures followed the ethical merits of Internet-based research using publicly available data only and keeping user anonymity (Bogen, Millman, Huntington, & Orchowski, 2018). Informed consent was not required since the analyzed comments were public, which also renders these data exempt from Institutional Review Board approval. However, since the researcher feels a considerable degree of discomfort in publishing personal information without obtaining permission to do so, and further to the calls of researchers to reflect their feelings in conducting research based on online information (see Fiesler & Proferes, 2018), real or screen names of both disclosers and commenters, as well as any identifying/personal information, have all been excluded from the analysis as a measure of privacy protection. In addition, when possible, quotes were slightly changed to prevent the possibility of tracing them back to the original commenter (see Ayers, Caputi, Nebeker, & Dredze, 2018).

### **Findings**

Three major themes through which online commenters reacted to male sexual victimization were identified: (1) legitimizing male vulnerability, (2) glorifying the act of disclosure, and (3) repairing broken victim masculinity.



### ***Theme 1: Legitimizing Male Vulnerability***

The most striking finding was the high rate of responses that supported the victims and recognized their suffering. As demonstrated in Table 1, 63.5% of responses included at least one expression of empathy, sympathy, encouragement, trust, or sense of belonging. Some of these responses were brief and included mainly generic emotional expressions such as hug, "loving you," "believing you," or a heart or kiss emoji. However, quite a few comments referred in detail to the experiences described by the disclosers and tried to improve their feelings with the help of comforting and soothing words that acknowledged their pain: "You probably understand that you are not at all guilty. It must be hard. I recommend that you consult a Center for Victims of Sexual Assault or psychologist" (personal communication, October 1, 2018), and also:

If you have felt this way, you have obviously been harassed, whether consciously or unconsciously. It is not in your mind and it is probably not your fault (if you ever thought that way). Any touch or speech that you do not agree with or that makes you uncomfortable is harassment (personal communication, October 18, 2017).

Expressing support and trust in the victims contradicts almost all components of male rape myths (i.e., blaming the victim, undermining his credibility, not recognizing his vulnerability, and minimizing the negative consequences of the assault). The supportive responses didn't judge the victims as being failed as men, but on the contrary: They legitimized the victims' vulnerabilities and normalized their feelings.

Moreover, some commenters affirmed the disclosers' feelings by comparing male and female victimization. These commenters claimed that "an injury is an injury" (personal communication, October 4, 2018) and that reactions such as shock or paralysis, as revealed by the victims in their disclosures, are also natural for men: "Men still seem to feel that there is a taboo in regard to their injury, and it's awful. Men are also sexually abused, both by women and by men" (personal communication, October 2, 2018); "[This is] obviously harassment. You froze like most women freeze when it happens to them" (personal communication, October 22, 2017); and "Women can harass too, men can be harassed too. Sometimes it takes a long time to realize that a particular event was an expression of sexual assault" (personal communication, October 3, 2018).

In contrast with the negative perception of "girly" men in the hegemonic masculinity discourse, feminizing the victims by the commenters was aimed at legitimizing their suffering and even denying the significance of gender as inherent to the common female-victim/male-perpetrator dichotomy.

Perhaps for this reason, some commenters have chosen to encourage the victims by using phrases that reaffirmed their "broken" masculinity, such as "You are the man!" "Well done, man!" or "What a man! You rock." Although the use of these expressions may represent merely a common catchphrase, the context in which they are written—usually accompanied by compliments about the acts of disclosure—reflects their ideological construction. The implicit message of these expressions was that the victim's masculinity had not been harmed by their injury; perhaps it was even the other way around. Disclosure requires courage, which is a stereotypical trait associated with manhood. In the words of one commenter: "He's the manliest man! He disclosed in order to warn other men and women!!" (personal communication, October 1, 2018).

In contrast with the high prevalence of positive reactions, less than 2% of comments dismissed feelings of victim distress or mocked them: "Wow, so creepy. A man hugged you . . . My condolences. Grow a pair" (personal communication, October 2, 2018), and

In my opinion, this story is cheap and sucks. And you're not as naive as you want to look here, sir. You're surely not a kid, aren't you? You knew very well that he was harassing you but you still came to meet him? Why? What were your intentions to get there? ask yourself. (personal communication, October 5, 2018).

Furthermore, most of these few unsupportive responses triggered severe backlash from other users, who strongly criticized the hegemonic assumptions they implied. One of the most heated discussions in this regard occurred after one commenter wrote the following comment:

If I come across a situation in which some man or another will try to make a mistake with me then he probably will end up in a hospital or worse. You are not a girl you are a man then act like a man. (personal communication, October 19, 2017).

This comment elicited dozens of counterresponses, which challenged all the hegemonic assumptions made by the commenter: "Ohhhhh right . . . what a cunt he is, what a female, he must have a little dick this gay. Real men are not hurt they punch in your face or rape back" (personal communication, October 3, 2018), as well as "There are other men's models in the world, not just how you would behave. Then act like a human being and show some empathy" (personal communication, October 2, 2018), and "No, Mr. Manly. You don't know how you'll react to something like that until you're actually there. Wish you never have to find out and in the meantime shut your mouth instead of grumbling about other men's experiences" (personal communication, October 1, 2018).

These comments failed to convince the original commenter, who confronted them farther down the thread. However, they reflected significant resistance in online discussions to the hegemonic positioning of men as active, self-sufficient, and invulnerable.

### ***Theme 2: Glorifying the Act of Disclosure***

The second most common form of support (48% of all comments) was compliment, which usually referred to the victim's courage. "Brave," "hero," "well done," and "you're the best" were common phrases used by commenters to encourage the victims and improve their self-esteem. These compliments were personal, praising the victim for overcoming the emotional difficulty of disclosure. Other users did not settle for the personal compliment but added a social aspect to it, claiming that a victim's personal courage paves the way to public recognition and acceptance of male victimization:

"Thanks for writing, it's really important for men to speak. It changes the understanding and consciousness of the public" (personal communication, October 17, 2017), as well as "You and other men who share our vulnerability as men pave the way for others who still have no voice and think that it has only happened to them" (personal communication, October 1, 2018), and "Believe you and thank you for

saying out loud what is not being said enough—all sectors suffer from sexual harassment. Keep posting . . . this is truly the Lord's work" (personal communication, October 3, 2018).

Highlighting the social importance of exposure and framing the disclosers as path blazers illustrates that many users not only challenge the normative masculine identity but also seek to increase the legitimacy of nonhegemonic discourse in the public sphere.

Except for one comment, "Most men have been sexually harassed or assaulted. The only reason they are not complaining is because of the feminists and their propaganda!" (personal communication, October 19, 2017), no response perceived male and female victimization as a zero-sum game, in which the appropriation of victimization by one gender violates the legitimacy of the other's. However, three comments used a feminist point of view in referring to the victims' experiences. According to them, exposure of male victimization is a means for understanding the experiences of women: "And no one asked a man why he didn't immediately complain. And no one told him he was a liar like they told women" (personal communication, October 2, 2018); "Think of the girls who live it from an early age, sometimes every day, sometimes by men who are close to them, even men of authority or just those who passed by on the street" (personal communication, October 18, 2017), and

Well done to you for the exposure and the conclusions. You were in the exact position of women, who later are asked in court: "But why didn't you say something? Why didn't you scream? Didn't you complain? How could he have known it was unpleasant to you and that you didn't want it?" (personal communication, October 3, 2018).

These comments paradoxically used the same mechanism criticized by feminism: trivializing sexual victimization. The empathy expressed in them toward the victims did not include real recognition of their injuries, but rather framed sexual assault and rape as inherently female.

### ***Theme 3: Repairing Victim Broken Masculinity***

Another key element of the comments was calling for prosecuting the perpetrators, which wasn't included in the original coding framework but grew from the data inductively. Around 10% of all comments encouraged the discloser to act against the attacker.

Some commenters justified these calls on rational grounds (e.g., preventing possible future casualties): "If you have the courage to share with us, you must have the courage to tell the police. Because he will surely hurt others that you can save" (personal communication, October 15, 2017) or "You must take this a step further. Go to the police and pay him what he deserves. He should suffer, not you, and you can literally save the lives of others" (personal communication, October 3, 2018).

A second type of response was much more emotional: urging the victims to take revenge on their attackers. Subtler responses called for the victims to publish the attackers' names online. Less subtle responses included derogatory insults of the attacker: "Son of a bitch!!! Go blow it in his face and ruin his life!!!!" (personal communication, October 15, 2017), as well as calls for physical revenge: "I'm suggesting

you not complain but cut their head. A knife in the throat or in the eye. Only this would deter other degenerates" (personal communication, October 2, 2018); "Come on! Let's go to his place and cut his penis" (personal communication, October 2, 2018) and "Grab this teacher, pay AIDS patients to rape him, and get your revenge" (personal communication, October 1, 2018).

Although attempting to express empathy toward the victims and to achieve justice for them, the implicit message of these comments reflects a patriarchal worldview, which links masculinity with domination and doesn't acknowledge other positions.

### Discussion

In the past decade, there has been growing scholarly interest in the use of social media as discursive spaces where values and norms are negotiated and where demands for societal change are articulated (Drüeke & Zobl, 2016). Specifically, in the context of gender, scholars have investigated the discursive power of online campaigns to create counterpublics that foster conversations on gender inequalities and eventually generate discursive shifts (Dixon, 2014; Lokot, 2018). The current study finds that social networks can serve as alternative spheres not only for women but also for men who contest traditional stereotypes of manhood, thus constituting significant spheres for reproducing nonhegemonic forms of masculinity.

According to Javaid (2017, 2018), male victims of rape are marginalized because of their emasculation, stigmatization, and identification as pseudovictims. They are socially constructed as abnormalities who contest the gender order and gender hegemony. Not only did the current findings not reveal marginalization of male victims in social media but they also demonstrated that online commenting surrounding male victims of sexual assault—maybe because people who bothered to read posts about sexual assaults and commented on them were initially biased in favor of nonhegemonic assumptions—suggested alternative notions of masculinity.

In fact, the vast majority of comments supported the victims, encouraged them, normalized their vulnerable positions, reduced their feelings of guilt or shame, and harshly condemned any expression of patriarchal norms from other users. Hence, it can be concluded to be similar to self-disclosures of women who share their personal stories online to increase public awareness of women's vulnerability in society (Loney-Howes, 2018). As such, men's online self-disclosures make experiences of sexual assault legible and negotiate conventional male rape myths. In addition, it has been found that social media are used not only to host discussions about male sexual victimization but also as forums for accountability and justice outside of the criminal justice system—similar to their role for women (Sills et al., 2016). This represents a significant benefit of social media in the context of male victimization.

However, this sphere seems to be still negotiating the breaking of hegemonic conventions. The masculinity structure that was reflected in some of the comments included a *simultaneous* holding-up of contradictory values, both hegemonic and nonhegemonic, for example by using the phrase "man" for reaffirming the victims' manhood or by encouraging the victims to violently seek revenge on their attackers.

This finding may indicate that new forms of masculinity are socially accepted, provided they still intersect with traditional ones.

According to Connell (1995), notions of masculinity are not fixed but are multiple and flexible. In regard to online gender discourse, Ging (2017) notes that online forums permit complex gender constructions in which nonhegemonic notions merge with hegemonic ones. Similarly, Venäläinen (2019) found multiple discourses through which manhood was reproduced online in the context of male victims of intimate partner violence. The findings of the current study reinforce and expand these arguments, demonstrating that they also apply to the context of male sexual victimization.

All in all, our findings lead to cautious optimism in regard to the role of social media in legitimizing male victimization and challenging male rape myths. The fact that in some of the responses hegemonic values are intertwined with victim support expressions highlights how deeply entrenched hegemonic masculinity is. However, it does not diminish the benefits of social networks as platforms for challenge and resistance. Similar to feminist campaigns, which not only shape what is disclosed and known about sexual assault but also what is felt and experienced (Mendes, Keller, & Ringrose, 2018, p. 15), self-disclosure of men in online networks challenges rape myths and opens new ways for narrating one's experiences.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Despite its contribution to understanding the social construction of masculinity in social media, the current study has some limitations. First, it was based on a relatively small sample, with no distinction made between different types of victims. An expansion of the corpus may have revealed broader themes in regard to questions such as: Did men who were sexually abused by women receive different responses compared with men who were abused by men? Or were there differences in responses to men who experienced rape compared with sexual harassment?

Based on the nature of the research corpus, which consisted mostly of self-disclosures that didn't reveal either the victim's or the perpetrator's sexual orientation, no distinction could be made between reactions elicited to gay versus straight victims of sexual assault. Given that sexual assault is more common among homosexual and bisexual men (Zalewski, Drumond, Prugl, & Stern, 2018) and that gay victims of sexual assault are seldom "doubly stigmatized" for both their homosexuality and their victim identity (Javaid, 2018), it is likely that the themes revealed in the current study may not be fully applied for gay victims of sexual assault.

Second, the study analyzed Facebook and Twitter, where commenters are not anonymous, contrary to those of other social networks (e.g., Reddit—see Ammari, Schoenebeck, & Romero, 2019). It is likely that the affordance of anonymity may increase the existence of an "online disinhibition effect"—or the idea that individuals feel less socially inhibited online than they do during in-person interactions (Suler, 2004, p. 3)—and would therefore be translated into less-supportive responses to male sexual victimization. In addition, both Facebook and Twitter—which are analyzed in the current study—are textually based social networks. It is possible that visually based social networks (e.g., Instagram or YouTube) may consist of different types of self-disclosures, which may accordingly gain different social responses (DeVito, Birnholtz,

& Hancock, 2017). Thus, in future studies, it is advisable to compare social networks with different affordances (anonymous/not anonymous, textual/visual) and to examine the construction of male victims in each of them.

Third, the study focuses on men's self-disclosures only, without comparing them to women's self-disclosures. Does the discourse surrounding men's experiences differ from the discourse surrounding women's experiences? Comparing responses toward male and female victims will also help rule out the possibility that the supportive responses found in the present study are encompassed under a broader reaction of "othering" victims as a strategy to reduce the threat the victim poses to our sense of justice or control (Mulder, Pemberton, & Vingerhoets, 2020).

Last, since the empirical literature about "slacktivism"—or the claim that online political activities have no impact on real-life political outcomes, but only a "feel good" effect on the participants (Morozov, 2009)—is mixed, investigating the relationship between online and offline environments might also prove important: Do the online discursive patterns surrounding male victimization also exist offline? How does discursive activism go beyond isolated personal expressions to translate into collective action? The current study represents a first effort in exploring these questions, but further investigation is still needed.

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