

Image-based sexual abuse in Ireland: a thematic and critical discourse analysis of Twitter data surrounding a highly-publicised case in 2013

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Abstract In order to understand attitudes that uphold social inequalities, discourse related to these inequalities must be analysed. Rape myths are socially upheld false beliefs about sexual violence (SV) which contribute to rape-supportive cultures. Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) is a form of SV which has increased with rising social-media use. A case of IBSA within the Irish context can be seen in an incident that occurred at a concert in 2013. Sexually explicit images of a 17-year old woman were posted online and went viral, with the woman (derisively dubbed ‘Slane girl’) becoming the subject of national and international discourse. The aim of this research was to investigate the attitudes of Twitter users in Ireland to the Slane case through a thematic and critical discourse analysis (CDA). Data were collected and analysed from Twitter application programming interfaces (API) using Python. A range of sentiments were identified towards the woman in the case - derision, shame, indifference and sympathy. It was concluded that the majority of tweets displayed a lack of empathy for the woman as well as a lack of understanding of the SV in the case. The low levels of reporting of SV in Ireland are likely influenced by cultural attitudes reflected in the findings of this research. It is recommended that further research is conducted to ascertain the opinions and attitudes of people in Ireland towards victim-survivors of SV and to develop methods of challenging rape myths in Irish society.

Key Words: Image-based sexual abuse, Rape Culture, Sexual-Violence, Gender-based violence, Sexual scripts

Introduction

Rape culture refers to cultural practices which excuse and tolerate sexual violence (SV) (Greene and Day, 2020; Cox, 2015; Hockett et al., 2015). There are many contributing factors to rape culture including rape myths that blame victim-survivors and exonerate perpetrators (Anderson and Doherty, 2008). Further factors include the normalisation of adversarial sexual scripts and shaming narratives used to enforce gender roles (Shefer and Munt, 2019; Bergoffen, 2018; Jozkowski, Marcantonio and Hunt, 2017). In the Irish context, there is available data on self-reported rates of SV and rape myths upheld by the Irish public (USI, 2020; Vallieres et al., 2020; RCNI, 2019; Leahy, 2014; MacNeela, 2014; McGee, O’Higgins, Garavan and Conroy, 2011; McGee et al., 2010; Ryan, 2008; McGee et al., 2002). Henry et al. (2020, p.4) describe image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) as the non-consensual taking of, sharing, or threats to share sexual images as a form of control, abuse and to sexually-shame individuals. Dodge (2015) highlights the devastating impact of IBSA, describing three cases in the USA of which two resulted in the suicides of their victims, and argues that IBSA is a form of SV in and of itself. Dodge further argues that rape culture allows for IBSA to be viewed as humorous/acceptable by society, and the victim-survivors of IBSA to be seen as deserving of their abuse. Studies have shown that social media can be an environment of support for those who have reported experiences of SV, but also a space for the perpetuation of shaming and rape myths (Leahy, 2021; Aurrekoetxea-Casaus, 2020; Zaleski et al., 2016). It is important to research discourses surrounding these cases in order to reveal aspects of rape culture adhered to within society. The lack of data on social media discourses surrounding SV in Ireland represents a research gap.

The present study is based on an analysis of opinions posted on social media, allowing for an exploration of the ways in which a sample of the Irish public responded to the case of image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) being studied (the Slane case). There is little information available about the facts of this case. The incident surrounded the online posting of sexually explicit images of a 17-year-old woman and a number of men at a concert in Slane, Co. Meath (Dillon, 2017). The images received both national and international attention and the woman was derogatorily dubbed ‘Slane girl’ (Ging, Kiely, Kitching and Leane, 2018). The gendered double standards of the Slane girl case are further discussed by Dillon (2017), Cahill (2017) and Chun and Friedland (2015). The case is considered in this paper to constitute an incident of IBSA and SV against all pictured in the images in accordance with Dodge (2015). The woman in the images complained to Gardaí of an incident of SV on the day the case occurred, and it was reported that the distress suffered by the woman following the incident resulted in her admission to hospital (Foy, 2013; Lally, 2013). The aim of the present study is to analyse the discourse of the public reaction to the case through a thematic and critical discourse analysis (CDA) and theorise the origins and impacts of this discourse through the research questions:

- 1 What are the opinions of Twitter users in Ireland surrounding SV in the Slane case?
- 2 What rape myths are upheld by Twitter users in Ireland in relation to this case?
- 3 What shaming narratives are evident in the Twitter response to the case in Ireland?

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Research Methodology

Twitter as a Data Source

Twitter is the largest and most popular microblogging website in the world and is a powerful source of information for measuring public attitudes (Antonakaki, Fragopoulou and Ioannidis, 2021; Mostafa, 2018; Zimmer and Proferes, 2014; Zhou and Chen, 2013). Twitter has been used as a research platform in over 10,000 research papers (Antonakaki, Fragopoulou and Ioannidis, 2021; Kharde and Sonawane, 2016). It was reported in 2013 that 27% of the population of Ireland had a Twitter account (O'Reilly, 2013).

Data Collection

Tweets were collected using Twitter's application programming interfaces (APIs). Python code was used to collect tweets (Appendix 1). Keywords for this data collection were constructed based on a manual exploratory analysis of Twitter search results for the phrase 'Slane girl' (Appendix 2). Results were limited to tweets that originated in Ireland and were composed within 2 months of the incident. 2,628 tweets were collected that met these criteria. Following the collection of these tweets, the dataset was manually cleaned by the researcher. Duplicate tweets, incoherent tweets and tweets which were not relevant to the Slane case were removed. Following the data cleaning, a total of 366 tweets were deemed appropriate for inclusion in the study.

Data Analysis

Content analysis is a flexible and accessible method for summarising large datasets that are often used to study social media data (Swann, 2021; Nowell et al., 2017). CDA was chosen to analyse the ways in which the discourse surrounding the case may have assigned meaning to the incident (van Dijk, 1993). The discourse of the tweets was taken to represent the knowledge and meaning assigned to the Slane incident by Twitter users in Ireland with the aim of gaining a perspective into the reproduction of inequality (Wigginton and Lafrance, 2019). Using thematic analysis and CDA, the data were categorised into four codes, each representing a particular sentiment towards the woman in the images (Appendix 3). A fifth code was created for tweets that referred to the men in the images. Some tweets which expressed multiple sentiments were categorised into multiple codes. Once the data had been categorised, the discourse of each tweet was critically analysed to identify themes within each code.

Limitations of Research Methods

The study's focus on Twitter is insufficiently broad to make deductions about the attitudes of the Irish public at large, hence the research serves as a snapshot of the Twitter social media response to the case. The results are unlikely to be applicable to other regions as they take into account the context of Ireland alone. The methodology is based on subjective reasoning about

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sentiments. The researcher did not have sufficient research resources to obtain and analyse data on tweet popularity in the form of likes and retweets.

Ethics of Research

Data revealing identifying information about the authors of Tweets were removed, ensuring anonymity for Tweet authors. It was not possible to receive consent from those involved in the case due to their anonymity. Every effort was made to afford dignity and a recognition of the trauma endured by those affected by the incident. Tweets that may have revealed any information regarding the identity of those involved were altered and the use of the derogatory moniker directed at the woman in the media and online has been used as sparingly as possible by the researcher, except for its quotation in tweets.

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Findings and Analysis

Figure 1: Word-cloud of 366 tweets collected for research



Fig. 1 displays a word-cloud of the 366 tweets which were analysed in this research, providing an insight into the language used to describe the incident. The majority of tweets expressed

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opinions about the woman in the images. 33% of the tweets contained some element of derision towards the woman. 33% of the tweets contained some element of shaming or blaming her for the incident. 25% contained an attitude of indifference towards her, and 22% of the tweets contained some element of sympathy for her. Only 15% of the tweets collected made reference to the men in the images. 5% of the tweets (20 in total) were inconclusive in the analysis of their sentiment and were not allocated to any code. A breakdown of the proportion of tweets assigned to each code can be seen in table 1.

Table 1: Tweets coded by their overall sentiment towards the woman in the images.

Sentiment Code	No. of Tweets	% of Tweet Sample
Derisive	121	33%
Shaming/Blaming	119	33%
Indifferent	92	25%
Sympathetic	81	22%

Discourses of Derision and Indifference

The most common theme of tweets identified within the derisive code were those that included vocabulary or ‘text talk’ associated with humour, such as ‘haha’ (47%). The next most common theme within this category was tweets that joked about the incident (36%), followed by tweets that joked specifically about the sex acts pictured in the images (26%). Other themes included tweets that joked about the woman in the images being promiscuous (22%), and tweets that humorously or sarcastically implied that the incident or woman were damaging to Ireland’s reputation (18%). Of the 25% of the total tweets which were coded as indifference, 67% clarified the location of the event as the Eminem concert in Slane to other Twitter users.

Discourses of Shame and Shaming Narratives

Shame and shaming narratives were found to be directed primarily at the woman in the images. Of the 366 tweets collected for this study, 33% contained some aspect of blaming/shaming her. The most common theme in this code were tweets that implied that the woman was solely responsible for the incident (36%). Tweets within this theme implied that her ‘*lack of self-respect*’ and ‘*irresponsible*’ behaviour were responsible for the incident, questioning why she would ‘*do that for all to see*’. Many tweets used language which implicitly blamed the woman

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for the images being taken and posted online, stating that she was *'caught'* or *'photo'd'*. The second most common theme in this code (31%) were tweets that included a graphic recounting of the sex act portrayed in the photos using language that centred on the woman's actions. She is referred to as *'sucking cock/dick'*, *'giving head without a care'*, *'getting down to questionable activity'*, *'warming a fair few cocks'*, *'servicing the lads'* and *'giving blowjobs'*. The third most common theme in this code (29%) were tweets that jokingly exaggerated the nature of the sex acts which were photographed. Tweets assert that the woman *'gave like 5 dudes a blowjob'* or was *'walking around chucking dicks into her'*. The fourth most common theme in this code (24%) were tweets that implied that the woman had brought shame to Ireland. Tweets referenced how the images do not *'reflect well on Ireland'*, and conclusions on the *'irresponsible behaviour'* and lack of *'morals'* of Ireland's youth at large are drawn from the incident. The least common theme (12%) included tweets that used derogatory names such as *'slut'* or *'bitch'* to describe the woman.

Discourses of Sympathy and Empathy

22% of the tweets in this study showed some level of sympathy towards the woman in the images. The most common theme (53%) in this code were tweets that criticised the online response towards the woman. Many in this theme reference the woman's hospitalisation following the release of the images. The second most common theme (48%) in this code were tweets that criticised the Irish culture of sexually shaming women, and the levels of sexism in contemporary Ireland. Tweets in this theme call the reaction to the images *'backward'*, exclaim that *'you're absolutely fucked [if you do] anything shameful [in Ireland]'*, and criticise the double standards in the treatment of the woman compared to that of the men in the images as something to be expected in Ireland. Many tweets reference slut-shaming in Ireland, one describing it as one of Ireland's *'favourite things to do'*.

Discourses surrounding the legal implications of the incident

Whilst 22% of the total tweets referenced some level of sympathy towards the woman in the images, few referenced the legal implications of the incident. The word *'consent'* is mentioned in only 5 tweets. 12 tweets in total question whether the taking and spreading of the images is a crime. 1 tweet uses the word *'rape'*, whilst trying to clarify the age of both parties involved. 1 tweet references the drinking age limit in Ireland, suggesting that it be raised to 21 *'in the wake of the Slane incident'*.

Discourses surrounding men involved in the incident

Only 15% of the total tweets referenced the men in the images. 50% of these tweets refer to the men in the images through language which focuses on the woman's actions. For example, the woman is referred to as being *'pictured giving multiple guys blow jobs'*, or *'blowing a lad in front of everyone'*. The focus on the woman's actions places her as the main actor in the incident, whilst the men are passive participants. The second most common theme (39%) in

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this code were tweets that blame or shame the woman without expressing an opinion on the men's role in the incident. These tweets refer to the woman's actions within the incident, often using vulgar language and blaming her for the incident stating she '*shouldn't have done it*' or that she was '*caught*'. In contrast, 9% of the tweets which mention the men blame or shame them for the incident. Less common themes which mention the men include tweets that highlight the double standards and sexism in the online reaction to the incident (17%), tweets that joke about the incident (15%) and tweets that attempt to clarify details of the incident (15%).

Discussion

Evidence of Rape Culture in the Discourse

Data analysis revealed an acceptance of jokes about the woman at the centre of the incident. 33% of tweets contained an element of derision towards the woman. Research has shown that there are significant correlations between the acceptance of sexist humour and sexual harassment, tolerance for SV and rape proclivity (Greene and Day, 2020; Klement, Sagarin and Skowronski, 2018; Cox, 2015; Edwards et al., 2011; Ryan and Kanjorski, 1998). The 25% of tweets that showed indifference towards the woman in the photos is also an indication of rape culture in Ireland. Many of the tweets in this category described the incident without showing concern for the welfare of any party involved in the incident. This reflects the work of Gavey (2019) and Marx (2005) who describe SV as being ordinary or routine in the lives of women. The indifference to the violation suffered particularly by the woman in the images highlights a culture in which this violation is considered an unremarkable incident by many, a source of amusement to others, and a cause of national shame to others still. It is theorised by Henry et al. (2020) that IBSA stems from cultural norms which objectify and commodify bodies. It could be argued in the Slane case that the woman's body was commodified as a source of amusement, and as a moral lesson to other women and girls to express their sexuality only in ways which conform to societal norms.

Rape Myths Perpetuated in the Discourse

Rape myths imply that victim-survivors provoke their own sexual assault and can have a significant impact on how victims are perceived and treated by society (Singleton et al., 2018; Parratt and Pina, 2017; Deming et al., 2013; Edwards et al. 2011; Jones, 2011; Anderson and Doherty, 2008; Burt, 1980). A number of rape myths were identified in the discourse surrounding the Slane incident.

- 1 Rape myths employ stereotypes about masculinity and femininity, with female victim-survivors often presented as being provocative to make them seem accountable (Parratt and Pina, 2017; Anderson and Doherty, 2008). Jokes about the woman's promiscuity, over-exaggerations of the nature of the incident, and tweets labelling her as a '*slut*', '*pornstar*' or a '*bitch*' are all present in the tweet sample. The men in the images are scarcely referenced in the bulk of tweets.

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- 2 The myth that the woman was ‘asking for it’ can be seen in the results. Tweets that shame the woman imply that she was at fault for the images being posted online. When describing the incident, the majority of tweets use language which presents the woman as the main active participant. Active verbs used to describe her actions say she ‘*sucked*’, ‘*gave*’, ‘*got*’ and ‘*serviced*’ the men in the photos, whilst the men are mere passive recipients or are not mentioned at all. Several tweets imply that the incident came about as a result of the woman’s character. She is described as being ‘*silly*’, having a ‘*lack of self-respect*’, being ‘*irresponsible*’, and her actions and thought patterns are questioned.
- 3 Another rape myth evidenced in the results is the treatment of the incident as ‘just sex’ rather than SV. The tweets which deride and shame the woman, as well as those which display indifference to her, point to a lack of recognition of SV. There is very little discussion of either the ability of those involved to consent or IBSA. The frequent retellings of the exact nature of the incident as well as the tendency to blame the woman for the images appearing online show a public propensity to label her experience as simply an embarrassing episode of ‘bad sex’ for which she was ‘caught out’, rather than as SV.

Gender and Shame in the Discourse

Shame can be used to enforce social and cultural values. In cases of SV, shaming narratives tend to be directed at victim-survivors (Shefer and Munt, 2019; Zakarriya, 2019; Bergoffen, 2018; Aakvaag et al., 2016). The majority of the tweets analysed express opinions about the woman in the photos, with only 15% of tweets directly referencing the men in the images. 33% of the tweets collected had some element of shaming or blaming the woman in the photos, whilst less than 1% shamed or blamed the men. This disparity between the focus on the woman and the men in the images points to a gendered allocation of responsibility for the incident. This narrative reflects the work of Shefer and Munt (2019), Zakarriya (2019), Hockett et al. (2015), Hockett, Saucier and Badke (2015) and Edwards et al., (2011). The woman is being ‘punished’ for transgressing the social and cultural norm of being a sexual ‘gatekeeper’ within heterosexual scripts. The men in the photos do not experience much derision, as it is expected for them to engage in sexual activity without consequence.

Victim-survivors often feel humiliation in the wake of SV and can experience secondary victimisation (Taylor, 2019; Anderson and Doherty, 2008). Shame directed at victim-survivors can also intimidate them into silence (Shefer and Munt, 2019; Bergoffen, 2018; Klement, Sagarin and Skowronski, 2018; Hockett et al., 2015; Hockett, Saucier and Badke, 2015; Deming et al., 2013; Edwards et al., 2011; Jones, 2011; Anderson and Doherty, 2008). Secondary victimisation can be seen in the Slane incident in reports of the impacts of the incident on the woman. It is possible that the excessive shaming aimed at the woman in the images may have discouraged other victim-survivors from coming forward in the wake of the incident. Reports on SV in Ireland such as McGee et al. (2002) and USI (2020) have shown

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that many who have experienced SV have kept the experience to themselves for a number of reasons, including shame. Incidents of mass public shaming only add to the discourse of SV as embarrassing or shame-inducing for the victim-survivor.

Nationalism in Ireland in the Discourse

A linkage of the incident to varying degrees of nationalistic opinions was identified in the results. 18% of tweets within the derisive code were jokes which referred to the incident's impact on the country's reputation, and 24% of the tweets in the shaming/blaming code implied that the woman had brought shame to Ireland. Within the sympathetic category, 48% of the tweets criticised Ireland's misogyny and culture of shame around sexuality. The creation of an independent Republic of Ireland and the influence of the Catholic church have influenced Irish culture regarding sexuality, through a hinging of the state's identity on the 'purity' of women's bodies (Killean, Dowds and McAlinden, 2021; Fischer, 2016; McGee et al, 2010; Inglis, 1997). Many tweets expressed disdain that the Slane incident happened in Ireland, primarily blaming the woman. The incident was used to jokingly imply that Ireland's youth at large were not 'classy', or that Ireland was 'full of sluts'. The fact that the woman in the photos received the vast majority of online vitriol whilst the men were left relatively unscathed, as well as the frequent depictions of Ireland's reputation being damaged by the incident, support Fischer's description of the Republic hinging its identity on moral principles demanding the purity of women's bodies. There is evidence of resistance to this culture of moral and sexual purity, which can be seen in the sympathetic code of tweets. The second-largest proportion of this code were tweets that criticised the Irish culture of sexual shaming and sexism in Ireland. These tweets rejected the online response which shamed the woman in the images.

Legal Framework for Access to Justice in this Case

In 2013 IBSA was not defined as a crime in Ireland, nor did the images constitute child pornography at the time (Irishstatutebook.ie, 2021). No criminal investigation was pursued in the incident (Foy, 2013; Lally, 2013). In the decade following the incident, a number of legislative updates occurred. In 2017, section 2 of the Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998 was amended with the legal age for participation in pornography raised to 18 (Law Reform Commission, 2020). The same year, sexual consent was legally defined in Irish law. Finally, in 2020, the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020 (or "Coco's Law") was enacted which created offences to deal with IBSA (DRCC, 2021). Despite these advancements, there are still a number of hurdles in place for victim-survivors to access justice in Ireland. The contemporary Irish context for SV prosecution is characterised by decreasing convictions, lengthy trial times and low prosecution rates (Molloy, 2018; Corr, O'Mahony, Lovett and Kelly, 2009; Hanly, Healy and Scriver, 2009). Self-reported experiences of SV may have increased in Ireland since 2002 (Vallieres et al., 2020). Henry et al. (2020) and Hlavka (2014) outlined common fears of victim-survivors when deciding to report, including a fear of being publicly identified and stigmatised. This can lead to a culture in which it is more

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difficult for victim-survivors to report the SV they experienced. As described by Henry et al. (2020), there remains a 'justice gap' in prosecuting IBSA worldwide. A cultural shift in attitudes towards victim-survivors of SV is needed in order to provide an environment in which victim-survivors feel confident seeking justice.

Conclusion

The Slane incident brought to the forefront of Irish society the issues of image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) and sexual violence (SV). The current research presented a number of significant findings. Only 3% of the tweet sample discussed the legality of the incident - these tweets scarcely discussed consent and did not discuss IBSA. A number of rape myths were identified within the discourse of the tweets. Discourses which implied that the woman was responsible for the incident were evident. A tendency to 'slut-shame' the woman was also identified. The shaming discourse which was identified was heavily gendered. Less than 1% of the tweets contained some element of shaming the man in the photos, whilst 33% contained an element of shaming the woman. Some tweets concluded from the incident that the woman had 'shamed' Ireland or damaged its reputation.

When synthesised, the results paint a portrait of the attitudes of Twitter users in Ireland towards the woman at the centre of the Slane incident. The three most commonly identified sentiments towards the woman were derision, shame/blame, and indifference, with only 1 in 5 tweets expressing some form of sympathy towards the woman. Only 15% of the tweets referenced the men in the images, indicating a highly gendered attribution of responsibility for the incident. These results are reflected in much of the literature on SV theory, which emphasises the role of (hetero)sexual scripts and prescribes cultural gender roles in allocating sympathy and shame in cases of SV. As the woman in question was photographed engaged in a sexual act, she was publicly shamed and blamed for the incident. The men in the photos, expected to pursue sex without an expectation of sexual purity, received a fraction of the online abuse experienced by the woman.

Contribution of Research to Knowledge

The findings of this research contribute to the data in Ireland on attitudes towards victim-survivors of SV. Further research in analysing the sentiment towards victim-survivors of SV is recommended, using other forms of opinion-based media. The finding that a large proportion of the sentiment towards the woman in this case was negative illustrates a need for further research into whether this is the same for other victim-survivors of SV in highly publicised cases and the reasoning behind these sentiments.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Python Code Used to Gather Tweets

```

words=['#slanegirl','slane girl', 'slane girl stuff', 'Slane Girl', 'slane girl is', 'Slane slut',
'#slaneboy', 'slane boy', 'slane', 'slut', 'slane girl solidarity', 'eminem', 'slane castle']

tweets_listFull=pd.DataFrame()

for i in flat_list[:13]:
    # Setting variables to be used below
    maxTweets = 1000
    # Creating list to append tweet data to
    tweets_list = []
    # Using TwitterSearchScrapers to scrape data and append tweets to list
    keyword = i
    country = 'ireland'
    start_time = '2013-08-18'
    end_time = '2013-10-18'
    total_query_String=keyword+" "+country+' since:'+start_time+' until:'+end_time
    print("Query String :: ",total_query_String)

    for i,tweet in enumerate(sntwitter.TwitterSearchScrapers(total_query_String).get_items()):
        if i>maxTweets-1:
            break
        tweets_list.append([tweet.date, tweet.id, tweet.content, tweet.username])
    # Creating a dataframe from the tweets list above
    tweets_list = pd.DataFrame(tweets_list, columns=['Datetime', 'Tweet Id', 'Text',
'Username'])

```

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```
# Display first 5 entries from dataframe
tweets_listFull=tweets_listFull.append(tweets_list)

print(tweets_listFull.shape)

tweets_listFull

tweets_listFull.to_csv('Tweets.csv')
```

Appendix 2: Keywords used to search for Tweets

1 '#slanegirl'	2 'slane girl'	3 'Slane girl stuff'	4 'Slane Girl'
5 'slane girl is'	6 'Slane slut'	7 '#slaneboy'	8 'slane boy'
9 'Slane'	10 'Slut'	11 'slane girl solidarity'	12 'Eminem'
13 'slane castle'			

Appendix 3: Codes used to identify tweet sentiment

<i>Derisive/ Mocking</i>	Tweets that express derision towards the woman, making jokes at her expense/of the incident.
<i>Indifference</i>	Tweets that discuss the logistics of the incident without showing sentiment towards the woman.
<i>Shaming/Blaming</i>	Tweets that shame the woman, imply that she brought shame to others, or blame her primarily for the incident.
<i>Sympathetic</i>	Tweets that express some level of sympathy/empathy towards the woman or criticise the online response to the

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	incident.
<i>Mention Men in Images</i>	Tweets that make any reference to the men in the images.



About the Author: Robyn Gannon graduated with a BA in Earth Sciences from Trinity College Dublin in 2019 and a first-class honours MA in Gender, Globalisation and Rights from the National University of Ireland Galway in 2022. Robyn’s research interests are gender-based violence and gendered inequalities in society. Robyn works as Keyworker at Aoibhneas women and children’s domestic abuse refuge in Dublin, and has worked with the UN International Organisation for Migration’s Protect-II project aimed at tackling gender-based violence. Robyn is interested in pursuing further research into GBV.

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