

Rape Culture and Social Media: Young Critics and a Feminist Counterpublic

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### **Abstract**

Social media sites, according to Rentschler (2014) can become both “aggregators of online misogyny” as well as key spaces for feminist education and activism. They are spaces where ‘rape culture’, in particular, is both performed and resisted, and where a feminist counterpublic can be formed (Salter 2013). In this New Zealand study, we interviewed 17 young people (16-23 years) who were critical of rape culture about their exposure and responses to it on social media and beyond. Participants described a ‘matrix of sexism’ in which elements of rape culture formed a taken-for-granted backdrop to their everyday lives. They readily discussed examples they had witnessed, including victim-blaming, ‘slut-shaming’, rape jokes, the celebration of male sexual conquest, and demeaning sexualized representations of women. While participants described this material as distressing, they also described how online spaces offered inspiration, education and solidarity that legitimated their discomfort with rape culture. Social media provided safe spaces that served as a buffer against the negative effects of sexism, and allowed participation in a feminist counterpublic that directly contests rape culture.

**Key words:** rape culture, social media, matrix of sexism, counterpublics, feminism, activism

In late 2013, a story unfolded on New Zealand national television (Rutherford 2013) that highlighted the interconnectedness of ‘rape culture’ and social media. A group of Auckland teenage boys calling themselves ‘Roast Busters’ were publically exposed for boasting on a Facebook page about instigating sex with underage and intoxicated girls, including acts that were denigrating and acts that fit with definitions of gang and/or statutory rape (Ryan 2013; Gavey 2013). As well as bragging, the boys used social media to recruit more ‘Roast Busters’ and to name and shame girls they claimed to have ‘roasted’ (Gavey 2013).

This case shared many of the elements reported in high profile cases in other parts of the world, in which sexual violence has been recorded, promoted, and its violation exacerbated through sharing stories and images online (e.g., Burleigh 2013; Ng 2015; Penny 2013; see also Henry and Powell 2015). It generated wide public outcry, which played out on social media, in mainstream media, and on the streets. Many experts and members of the public were angry at what was seen as a slow and inadequate police response (see New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse 2013). Many also condemned popular talk-back radio hosts for victim-blaming comments that minimised the perpetrators’ actions as “mischief” (Dogan 2013). Wide dissatisfaction over the handling of the case contributed to renewed discussion in New Zealand about the problem of sexual violence, including how to improve the criminal justice system response to it (New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse 2013, 2014; Independent Police Conduct Authority 2015). Many of these discussions adopted the language of rape culture to emphasise the wider social and cultural systems that made the boys’ actions possible (e.g., New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse 2013; Satherley 2013).

Introduced by feminists in the 1970s, the concept of rape culture provides a radical critique of conventional assumptions about rape as an aberrant act of a deviant individual. Rather, it suggests, rape is connected to and enabled by a myriad of everyday social and

cultural practices (see Gavey 2005). Two interlocking patterns are identified as creating the conditions of possibility for sexual violence: (1) victim-blaming and other discourses that minimize and excuse rape, and (2) taken-for-granted features of everyday heterosexuality that normalize and naturalize male sexual aggression and female sexual passivity (Gavey 2005; Gavey and Senn 2014). This ‘cultural scaffolding of rape’ (Gavey 2005) is widely tolerated within many societies even while rape itself is ostensibly condemned. In the aforementioned New Zealand case, widespread criticism of the boys and sympathy for the girls co-existed with victim-blaming and with comments that minimized and normalized the boys’ sexually aggressive behaviour.

Feminist attention to rape culture has recently undergone a revival in many countries, responding to issues such as the widespread sexual objectification of women in the media, routine victim-blaming in response to high profile rape cases, and humour that trivializes rape (e.g., Bates 2014; Valenti 2013; Ringrose and Renold 2012). While none of these phenomena are new, their everyday reach and visibility has arguably intensified through online technologies in general, and through social media in particular.

Social media refers to a heterogeneous range of internet-based platforms that “allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, 61), enabling, and shaping specific forms of, online sociality and creativity (Van Dijck 2013). The pervasiveness of these platforms – such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and numerous others – has driven many social and cultural activities online (Van Dijck 2013). In spite of social media’s association with innovation and social progress, however, traditional gendered power relations that shape ‘offline’ spaces are replicated online. For example, women and girls are threatened and sexually harassed through social media (Filipovic 2007; Megarry 2014), and bullied and shamed for their sexual behaviour (Henry and Powell 2015; Poole 2013). In the Roast Busters case, the identities of girls who were violated were revealed to

their peers through the boys' Facebook page (Rutherford 2013). Many girls were also named and discussed in intimate detail on the social media site ask.fm (Gavey 2013).

Though social media is undoubtedly implicated in the perpetuation of rape culture, Rentschler (2014) argues that it is an important space for young people in particular to learn about rape culture, and challenge it. This is not surprising given the internet and new media have been identified as important contemporary sites of feminist participation in the public sphere and for activism, particularly for young women (e.g., Harris 2008, 2010; Keller 2012; McLean and Maalsen 2013; Schuster 2013). As Salter (2013) argues, online spaces can be used to host discussions about sexual violence that run “contrary to established social and legal norms” (226). In this way, and through circumventing the gatekeeping of “old media”, he argues, they provide a “counterpublic” (a notion popularised by Fraser 1990) that operates not only as a forum for women's and girls' voices, but in which online activists can seek accountability and justice outside of the criminal justice system. As Fraser (1990) argues, the ‘public sphere’ in which issues are debated and deliberated upon has never been a truly open forum that is accessible for all people to participate in on equal terms. In particular, the dominant ‘public’ is rife with exclusions along gender, race/ethnicity and class lines, and women's voices have always struggled for legitimacy. However, as Fraser (1990) notes, this does not mean that subordinated groups have been silent. They have created their own discursive spaces in which “members invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (67). Fraser (1990) cites the example of the U.S. feminist subaltern counterpublic of the late twentieth century, which had its own media, academic programs, conferences, festivals, local meeting places, and so on. These feminist spaces provided an alternative public sphere for feminists to develop new terms and analyses of their social reality that worked to directly contest and reduce “the extent of our disadvantage in official public spheres” (67).

This kind of alternative discursive space is now flourishing, in various forms, on the internet (e.g., McLean and Maalsen 2013), where rape culture has been a prominent target of feminist activism (e.g., Rentschler 2014). This activism documents what rape culture is and critiques it (e.g., the Tumblr blog ‘stfurapeculture’ [shut the fuck up rape culture]; the Twitter hashtag #RapeCultureIsWhen started by Zerlina Maxwell, Culp-Ressler 2014). It satirizes victim blaming (e.g., the Twitter hashtag #SafetyTipsForLadies started by Hilary Bowman-Smart, Davies 2013, and then blogged about on Tumblr). And it provides fora for testimonials (the Twitter hashtag #mencallmethings, Megarry 2014; The Everyday Sexism Project, n.d.) and for giving support and advice to those who have experienced sexual violence (e.g., stfurapeculture) (Rentschler, 2014).

Importantly, Rentschler (2014) argues, critiques on social media produce supportive spaces where women and girls can share understandings of, and mobilize against, sexual violence and rape culture. Young women’s social media use creates a network within which they have the capacity to construct a collective response to rape culture – what Rentschler (2014) terms “response-ability” (drawing on Kelly Oliver’s concept). Through the uptake of these “response-able” forms of mediated feminism, she and others would argue, a counterpublic of young feminists is emerging online.

This kind of social media-based resistance was evident in the wake of the Roast Busters scandal. Young people, in particular, were instrumental in orchestrating public responses and action. Two young women used social media to organise protest marches in main cities through the country (3 News 2013), and to circulate a petition about rape culture addressed to the Prime Minister (Satherley 2013). Another group of current and former schoolmates of some of those involved used social media, alongside public rallies and meetings, to critique what they argued was the school’s climate of tolerance surrounding

sexual violence and rape culture, and its lack of action in relation to the Roast Busters (S.O.S.: Support Our Survivors 2013; McCracken and Leask 2013).

In this paper we report on a study conducted in Auckland soon after this high profile case came to public attention. Given the ways social media was prominent in promoting the boys' rape-supportive ethos, we were interested in finding out more about young people's exposure to rape culture online. Social media was also important in circulating critiques of the boys' actions and of victim-blaming responses that minimised their actions. We were also therefore interested in exploring what kinds of critical responses to rape culture young people found online, and how they engaged with these. Building on Rentschler's (2014) and Salter's (2013) analyses of online sexual violence activism, we draw on young people's own descriptions of their exposure and responses to rape culture and to challenges to it online, to explore the possibilities for contesting rape culture through social media.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

We sought to interview young people who had noticed elements of rape culture online, particularly those who were 'critical of and uncomfortable with' it. We recruited participants using flyers posted around the University of Auckland campus, through notices on social media and our project website<sup>1</sup>, and via email. We also used snowballing, whereby participants recruited interested friends. We explicitly sought participants aged between 16 and 23 (to enable a focus on young people who were likely to have grown up using social media, but be old enough that parental consent was not required for them to participate), who had resided in New Zealand for at least two years (so that some familiarity with local culture and events could be assumed), and who lived in Auckland and spoke fluent English (for practical reasons to facilitate face to face interviews). As the great majority of young people

in New Zealand use the internet (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2013), and around 95% of people aged 16-30 use a social networking site (Gibson et al. 2013), we did not screen for social media use. Our information for potential participants noted that we were also interested in hearing about whether they had come across anything “on social media (or elsewhere) that is challenging [rape culture], such as feminist critiques and other kinds of social justice activism”. The notices provided brief phrases to spark interest and to cue prospective participants into what we meant by rape culture, such as, Robin Thicke’s ‘Blurred Lines’, the Roast Busters case, and more generalized terms like victim-blaming. All potential participants who contacted us within the first five weeks of promoting the study and who fitted our criteria were offered interviews, which took place during June and July 2014.

We interviewed 17 young people. One participant was not included in the analysis because they did not demonstrate any critical engagement with rape culture. The 16 we included were aged between 16-18 (5), 20-21 (5), and 22-23 (6). On an open-ended questionnaire they identified their gender as female (14), male (1), and transmasculine (1); and their sexuality as heterosexual/straight (8), queer (2), pansexual (2), gay (1), and “slutty” (1) – two provided no response to this question. Participants’ self-reported ethnicity spanned one or more of the following: Pākehā<sup>2</sup> (14), Māori (3), Indian (3), Japanese (1), Chinese (1), Chinese Singaporean (1), Turkish (1). Most participants were university students (9) with the remainder either secondary school students (3) or in paid employment (4).

### **Interviewing**

Each semi-structured interview was conducted face-to-face by one of our team of four peer interviewers (the first four authors; aged 21, 21, 22, and 26), accommodating participants’ preference for interviewer gender. The interviewers identified as women (3), and men (1); as heterosexual (2), lesbian (1) and pansexual (1); Pākehā (3) and Pākehā/Fijian Indian (1).

Three were highly engaged users of social media; one was less engaged. The interviews took place at a location convenient for participants (mostly on campus), and ranged in length from 40 minutes to 2.5 hours, averaging approximately 1.5 hours.

Our interview schedule was loosely divided into three sections. In the first part, we gauged participants' social media usage: which media they used, how they used them and with what frequency and duration. We presented participants with a social media mind map of a range of popular social media to guide conversation (see Appendix A). The diagram functioned as a visual note and point of reference about the range of media that we interested in hearing about participants' engagement with. Presenting the scope of our interest in a non-linear and non-hierarchical way like this allowed participants to lead with topics they wished to focus on, at the same time as providing a context that allowed the participant or interviewer to easily move the conversation within this wider field. The second section of the interview focussed on participants' accounts of rape culture. We used prompt cards (e.g., 'rape jokes', 'slut shaming') to spark conversation and to help participants recall examples that were salient for them, which we subsequently pursued in depth. In the final section of the interview, we asked participants to describe their encounters with resistance to rape culture on social media. During the interview, participants were able to use a tablet to find and document examples they were describing. Although our questions asked specifically about experiences with rape culture on social media, most participants provided broader and more comprehensive accounts, tracing rape culture across multiple domains of everyday life.

Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Quotations used here have been lightly edited to remove fillers and word repetition, taking care not to change meaning. We use square brackets to indicate that we have inserted a clarification that is not in the participant's own words, and [...] to indicate that a portion of speech has been cut.

To protect anonymity, all participants were assigned pseudonyms and potentially identifying information has been altered or excluded from this analysis. Because the demographic information supplied by some participants is unique enough to be potentially identifying (within a small city), we do not match these details with pseudonyms. While we recognise the limitations of this omission in terms of contextualising participants' accounts, we considered it necessary in order to maintain anonymity. We were mindful that the material discussed in the interviews could be distressing for some participants, and all were provided with a list of resources at the end of the interview, with contact details for local support and information sites, groups, and services. The study was approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee.

Our analyses were developed through collaboration that began in the early stages of the project. As authors of different generations and levels of social media use we shared and discussed our own knowledge and observations in the process of refining our research questions and teasing out relevant dimensions of the phenomenon of rape culture and responses to it on social media. This enabled us to fine-tune the interview format in ways to best elicit participants' accounts of their relevant experiences. During the interview period and subsequent data analysis we met roughly weekly to discuss how the interviews were going and what was coming up in them. As the first four authors each engaged in close readings of the transcripts, we all met to discuss key patterns across the interviews, as well as other notable points of interest. We were interested both in what participants told us about their experiences, and the way they described them, seeking primarily to attain a rich description of the ways in which this group of young Aucklanders were encountering and responding to rape culture through social media.

The analysis is presented in two sections. The first outlines participants' descriptions of a 'matrix of sexism' in which misogyny, rape culture, and sexism are normalised, both

online and offline. The second section focuses on what participants identified as key domains of critical responses on social media to the matrix of sexism and to rape culture more specifically: feminist education, safe space, and challenges for accountability.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

### **The Matrix of Sexism**

When participants talked about rape culture they conveyed a sense of living within what we are referring to as a matrix of sexism: that is, an environment in which sexism, misogyny and elements of rape culture merge as a normalized backdrop to everyday life. Mimi, for instance, referred to a “blanket of sexism”, and Katie noted “you can’t really escape it; it’s everywhere”. At the same time, many participants suggested that the sexism that seemed obvious to them was not always apparent to those around them. As Jess remarked, “lots of people do [think that] ‘rape culture doesn’t exist’, or that these things are just normal parts of life.” Participants discussed several examples of rape culture in particular, including everyday trivializing uses of the word rape, normalizing portrayals of male sexual conquest, and widespread victim-blaming and ‘slut-shaming’.

Many participants noted with concern the way in which the word rape is used as a metonym for everyday acts of, relatively trivial, domination or ruination. For example, Bridget spoke of a friend who “if she’s on her cell phone [...] she says oh this app is just raping my battery, you know” and commented that the term rape was “so normalized to talk about”. Similarly, Claire explained:

[To] the guys [playing *World of Warcraft*], it was just a casual thing that you threw out as a sort of shock jock thing, like, ‘oh man that guy raped my face’, or ‘I’m gonna rape his face’ and that kind of thing, they would just throw it around in a really casual way.

Although the casual use of the word rape may not seem inherently sexist, it contributes to a matrix of sexism in the way it invites desensitization towards acts of violence that are disproportionately perpetuated by men against girls and women. It renders the term rape familiar, but in using it to refer to ordinary everyday aggravations it arguably trivialises the act and experience of actual rape.

In painting a picture of the place of sexism and rape culture in society, participants drew examples from popular music and television to illustrate how women’s bodies are portrayed as decorative objects and men are portrayed as exercising an aggressive entitlement to sex. They also pointed out the problematic, selective way in which very few instances of sexism and rape culture come to be ‘called out’ and widely criticised. For instance, Bridget referred to the lyrics of a Chris Brown song which appear to condone male sexual aggression, noting that it did not receive the same kind of wide critical attention that Robin Thicke’s ‘Blurred Lines’ received in 2013:

The line was something about ‘saying no is not an option, I’m going to take what’s mine’ [...] before that it had all been talking about ‘you sexy girl’ [...] I was like ‘okay that’s sick.’ I hated that. There was no huge deal about that.

Similarly, Katie referred to a popular television show character whose sexually aggressive behaviour was admired: “a lot of the cool male characters are womanizers and they’re [portrayed as] awesome because they convince the girl to have sex with them [...] like Barney Stinson off ‘How I Met Your Mother’. Everyone loves him”. In relation to the high

profile local Roast Busters case, Jess noted that she was surprised it got so much publicity given such events were “not that uncommon”.

Yet even in high profile sexual violence cases where the dominant public response was commonly condemnation and outrage, most participants (12) noted the co-existence of traditional victim-blaming responses, particularly on social media:

This guy just kept coming on the [Facebook] page [for a street march protesting the Roast Busters case] and we couldn't get rid of him [...] [he would] constantly post that these girls [...] were falsely accusing them [the Roast Busters] and they [the victims] were asking for it. (Claire)

A lot of comments [on social media] are like, ‘oh, the girl deserved it because she was wearing revealing clothing which may have sent the wrong message.’ (Jamie)

Both victim blaming and ‘slut shaming’ were portrayed as commonplace by many participants. As Samira observed, “guys who have had lots of sex, they tend to get celebrated, whereas the girls get shunned, even by their friends and stuff”. Participants described this sexual double standard as normal online (such as in response to photos posted on Facebook) as well as offline. As Bridget said, “I can think of right now a couple of examples where I’ve been in town or something at a bar and my friends have said ‘oh my god like she’s such a slut look at what she’s wearing’ kind of thing”. In portraying slut shaming as ubiquitous, participants also sometimes directly drew links to its role in controlling female sexuality and in preparing the ground for blaming women for sexual aggression against them. Taylor noted:

Yeah my sister has one [ask.fm account], and she constantly just gets random comments being like, ‘you and your sisters are such sluts’ [...] occasionally someone will post a

photo of themselves and you'll see the really gross comments like, 'you're gonna go get raped'.

Some participants noted how depictions of male sexual aggression towards girls and women as simply natural could morph into justifications of some kinds of male sexual aggression as not only normal but acceptable:

[Lots of people think] it's natural for men to be quite sexually aggressive – that's fine 'cause women (laughs) are really into that or, I don't know, something stupid. (Jess)

We're so used to violence against women as just a normal part of entertainment and media, and if we don't like it it's just not to our taste. But breastfeeding and mastectomies, I think because they're not sexual, they're not [considered] an acceptable part of entertainment in any scope and so they're not [considered] appropriate. (Victoria)

Victoria's account highlights the power of rape culture to obfuscate any moral dimension to portrayals (and enactments) of violence by one whole class of people against another. Sexism and rape culture are so normative, she suggests, that to object is counter-normative, and likely to be (dis)regarded as an expression of personal taste. In this way, the matrix of sexism works to reinforce itself.

At the same time, many participants described witnessing explicit violence and aggression. They commonly encountered misogynistic remarks online, and explained that they have come to expect this level of violence. For example, Samira said that if a woman commented on YouTube that a video was "very sexist", she would expect a hostile response – such as "oh get back into the kitchen bitch". Participants also identified social media groups or pages which overtly celebrated physical and sexual violence against women:

There are pages on Facebook called *Kicking sluts in the vagina, I notice a little bitch that needs a good slap, Riding your girlfriend slowly 'cos you don't wanna wake her up* [...]

But the one I was talking about had actual pictures of incredible violence [...] It was really difficult to get it removed (Victoria).

As in this example, where Facebook refused to remove sites showing and arguably celebrating violence against women, participants often discussed how difficult it can be to speak back to or resist sexism. They described anger, frustration, disappointment, and sometimes distress with the pervasiveness of sexism and rape culture, and the ineffectiveness of mainstream responses to it. Ivy, for instance, described the power of sexist attitudes as “disturbing”. And Maddie said the Roast Busters case was “just, ugh. The police! The police’s attitude towards it was just appalling [...] it made me so angry”.

A sense of resignation about sexism and rape culture coloured many participants’ talk. The risk of misogynistic backlash could make critiques of sexism very difficult to articulate (see also Calder-Dawe forthcoming), with some participants noting that this would discourage them or their peers from openly identifying as feminist. As Victoria described:

I tend to shy away from ever actually engaging in Facebook arguments [...] if someone who’s feminist tries to defend something, people will be like ‘oh you’re just a boring bitch’ or ‘you’re just a stupid slut, you just need to get fucked’.

Alongside frustration and anger, however, most participants reported actively engaging in some way with feminist critiques of rape culture, as we discuss in the following section.

### **A feminist counterpublic**

Participants discussed three key kinds of response against the matrix of sexism. Firstly, they described feminist education online as a way of challenging sexism and creating change. Secondly, they talked about the facilitation of an intersectional feminist community online, which carved out spaces for critique in an otherwise sexist public environment. Thirdly, they described this education and community as forming a platform that enabled direct and deliberate forms of critical engagement or activism.

**Feminist education on social media.** Participants described social media as a powerful medium for raising awareness and educating people about feminist issues. This kind of ‘feminist education’ can occur in the course of a person’s everyday engagement with social media, allowing new ideas and information to be introduced, shared, and taken up. As Victoria noted:

With social media I feel like I’ve been really educated in lots of different areas of feminism that I wouldn’t have learned about or considered without it [...] It’s kind of like this whole new education for different opinions and stuff like that.

Social media sites were portrayed as particularly effective for raising feminist issues in ways that are accessible, user-oriented and able to be widely disseminated. As well as making it easy to deliberately create and seek out feminist or social justice material, the nature of people’s engagement with social media meant it was possible to be exposed to ideas and issues that might not otherwise be sought out. When asked what influenced her in becoming a feminist, Taylor said “I think being a young person on social media, [feminist discourse] just gets amplified [...] you just gradually learn more and more.” Rather than actively seeking out feminist material, she described feminist messages as part of the online landscape for young people. As an active producer of online content, Jyoti described how feminist and other kinds of theory could be packaged in ways that attracted a wider audience:

Anything that somebody finds relatable is going to get passed around [...] you might make a post that's really serious and really intelligent but nobody kind of understands it so it's not going to get popular [...] a lot of the time [Tumblr] posts by people like me who are kind of somewhat literate in gender theory or race theory or able to put it into words but also talk like teenagers, that tends to get really popular because people find that accessible and educational. It's not scary, it's not 'learning' right, it's not 'social justice'.

This form of accessible education about social justice issues is powerful as it is able to (often inadvertently) reach people on a large scale without necessarily appearing to 'preach' feminism. Hinsey (2013) suggests that a potential disadvantage of online feminism is that in the rush to be 'easily-digestible', bloggers can reduce feminism to entertainment, and not end up providing young people with critical feminist tools. Our participants, however, rejected a strict demarcation between education and entertainment. Jyoti, for instance, emphasised that simplicity does not have to detract from the strength of an overall message, which may be rooted in quite complex theory. As Hinsey (2013) herself notes, this is the other side of the story of online feminism – the potential for creative contributions to 'infuse dense theory with humor' (30) in ways that introduce feminism in intriguing ways (giving the example of Danielle Henderson's popular 'Feminist Ryan Gosling' memes). Likewise, Keller (2012, 440) describes a kind of "playful activism" in which girl bloggers intersperse "fluffier fare" with serious feminist analyses in order to strategically appeal to a more mainstream audience.

Participants also described social media as an effective tool for deliberately seeking out a feminist education. Victoria, for instance, talked about how social media helped her to understand the importance of intersectionality in feminism, and to incorporate this into her own views. To illustrate this, she described her proactive efforts to understand the particular type of feminism of African-American singer Beyoncé:

So I tend to use these websites to try and clarify certain things and see if I can identify with what some people say. Without social media I wouldn't have [been] checking my awareness around why and how my views are formed compared to how other people's might be formed [...] that particular website was like a young African American woman who's gay, living in the States, talking about how white feminists love to criticize over-sexual women of colour, and constantly are saying how that's like, degrading feminism, without having any perception of really different backgrounds, and really different opportunities.

In these ways, social media provides a space where diverse feminists can share knowledge and experience, and learn from each other. This has huge potential for the development of a more intersectional feminism that understands and accepts difference, and recognizes privilege (Mann 2014; Thelandersson 2014). With a political will to inclusivity and respect, social media offer routes for exchange that not only can educate people about feminism, but can diversify and enrich understandings about what feminism is.

**Safe counterpublic space.** Many participants described social media as a space in which they could be a part of alternative virtual communities. Following Salter (2013), we draw on Fraser's (1990) notion of 'subaltern counterpublics' as a way of understanding how these online spaces can function for young people critical of rape culture. While Salter (2013) focuses specifically on the use of social media for making public allegations of sexual violence and abuse, we found that participants described internet spaces functioning to host broader counterpublics in contesting rape culture. Rather than identifying with a defined group or community, these young people often depicted themselves as part of a large diffuse

network or movement of feminists. For example, when asked whether she belonged to any particular feminist groups, Samira responded:

I don't know; I'm not part of any specific [feminist] group. But I don't think there is any specific group; I think it's just the wider feminist movement really [...] so I'm just kind of a part of that [...] I don't tend to talk out that much on social media. I tend to just see it [feminist critiques of rape culture] and learn about it and tell my friends in real life, and I have actually gotten quite a few of my friends really into the movement.

As Samira suggests, social media is a vehicle through which young people can easily become connected with a feminist movement. While online spaces are not always clearly separable from “real life”, as Samira indicates, some young women value online communities for reducing a sense of being isolated as a feminist (Schuster 2013). Such communities operate through virtual networks and discursive spaces to host a sense of collective belonging. While Web 2.0 offers young feminists the opportunity to actively engage in the production of cultural meaning (Harris 2010; Keller 2012; McLean and Maalsen 2013; Salter 2013), several of our participants like Samira suggest that a sense of belonging can be gained not only through creating content, but also through the consumption and re-distribution of what their peers are producing (c.f. Keller's 2015 point about the exclusionary potential of contemporary ‘brand’ feminism).

Many participants described social media spaces in which there was an emphasis on kindness, the construction of safe spaces, and accessibility for marginalised groups. Through a “politics of care” (Rentschler 2014), safe online spaces can operate not only as healing spaces for those who have experienced sexual violence and abuse, but also to provide validation and support for anyone critical of rape culture and sexism. They can provide what

Ivy referred to as a “whole other world of understanding”. Referring to Tumblr in particular she said it,

had quite an effect on showing how wrong mainstream media gets it when they represent women. Once you go into Tumblr you’ve kind of created a whole other world and understanding of the world [...] It’s a place where you see the representation that’s not seen in most aspects of society because of the power structures that hold everything together.

For Fraser (1990), counterpublics are not enclaves, because by definition they are formations that seek to address and contest the dominant public sphere. However, in emphasising the importance of safe spaces for marginalized groups, Squires (2002, 458) describes the role of “‘enclaved’ publics” which have been particularly important for African Americans in the United States during periods of intense oppression. These are spaces and discourses that are “hidden from the view of the dominant public and the state” (458), which are dedicated to Black needs and fostering resistance. Squire differentiates this way of responding to the dominant public sphere with counterpublics, a term she reserves for types of response that adopt more direct communication. In the different forms of community shaped by the internet, Tumblr was spoken of by our participants in a way that seemed to provide both. As McLean and Maalsen (2013) note, social media occupies a paradoxical space between the private and the public. Social media like Tumblr in particular, can provide forms of interaction that function to promote safety for a subaltern community, enabling a safe enclave of sorts even though it is not strictly hidden or bounded. At the same time it provides a vehicle for more direct forms of engagement with the dominant public sphere. As Jyoti notes, this relative safety of Tumblr can enable people from marginalized positions to feel freer to share their experiences and knowledge of the world, which can in turn effect change through expanding the knowledge and understanding of peers in this wider network:

If you want to know about something ask the people who are affected by it, right? [...] Tumblr feels like a safer space for people to say a lot of things they actually mean, even if it's 'I'm tired of white people' [...] so definitely it's activism because people learn about your life, and people learn about who you are and how you conceptualize the world and sort of incorporate that into their world view.

Several participants portrayed the feminist spaces on social media as 'counter', not only in terms of the subversion of traditional rape culture discourses, but also in terms of the subversion of race-based power relations within feminism. Maddie, for instance, commented that "feminism isn't just about gender equality; it is about equality of races, because you include everyone in that. And it's also about accepting other genders as well". In this way, participants portrayed social media as a helpful feminist tool with potential to build new kinds of safe and more equal feminist spaces, where the politics of race and transgender rights, for example, are incorporated.

Some social media sites were described as more useful than others in providing feminist counterpublic space. As the examples above highlight, Tumblr was emphasised as a particularly prominent medium in which feminist spaces could be created. This is not to say that other social media sites were not host to feminist action, as participants brought numerous examples to us from other sites (nor is it to imply that Tumblr is always or inherently a feminist space). Rather, many participants described Tumblr, in the way that they used it, as the most common place to be able to access feminist ideas and space. For example, Jyoti commented that:

I think misbehaviour [on Facebook] gets shut down a lot less quickly than Tumblr partly because Tumblr is very collective justice, we stick together, and Facebook is

very, you know, if you don't report stuff to the Facebook admin you're basically screwed.

This resonates with Rentschler's (2014) use of the notion of response-ability, where the ability to collectively and directly respond to sexism and rape culture defines many feminist social media endeavours. The direct interaction and response to sexism or rape culture that is possible on sites such as Tumblr, without the (necessary) intervention of administrators of the site, may explain Tumblr's affinity with social justice dialogues. Tumblr was often portrayed as a collectively-operated safe space, as Jyoti describes. The more youth-oriented, peer-constructed spaces of sites such as Tumblr may provide a particular freedom in which to conduct a response-able (Rentschler 2014) form of feminism, as it allows some reworking and restructuring of traditional power relations, including those that are age-related. Thus, our participants' ideas about safe space incorporated not only an intersectional feminist community, but also a space less constrained by generational dynamics and by sexist gatekeepers.

**Accountability and Justice.** Many participants explained how social media offers an important vehicle for seeking accountability and justice – from targeting everyday acts of sexism and rape-supportive statements to sexual violence itself. As Jyoti notes below, the internet provides a powerful technology for exposing problematic behaviour of others – “‘call out’ culture” (e.g., Munro 2013) – in ways that have potential to disrupt traditional power relations:

‘Trial by internet’ is still accessible to a lot of us [...] and that’s a lot of what keeps us safe [...] I’ve known parents who literally have stopped hitting their kids because their kids will put it on Facebook.

The mechanisms of this kind of exposure can vary considerably. Samira explained that when young feminists see sexist or rape-supportive comments on Tumblr, the people posting the comments can be called out and held responsible, but in ways that are not seen as overly hostile and can be taken up as learning opportunities. She described a comment on a photograph posted on Tumblr of a woman at Slutwalk, saying “when you think about it it’s like putting a piece of meat in front of a dog and telling them not to eat it.” In response, somebody else posted a photograph of their dog sitting in front of an open jar of peanut butter with the caption “peanut butter is my dog’s favourite food ever; do you know why he’s not eating it? ‘Cause I told him ‘no’.” Samira described this humorous, yet direct type of reaction as typical of Tumblr activism. Resonating with the notion of response-ability (Rentschler 2014), it shows the power of social media in enabling users to immediately and directly contest sexism at a peer to peer level. While debate has been growing in the blogosphere about the complexities of call out culture, including what some argue are its toxic edges<sup>3</sup>, participants did not discuss this operating negatively within their own online communities. Rather, they conveyed a sense of the communicative dynamics on Tumblr, at least, in a way resembled a process of “calling in” (Tran 2013) rather than calling out.

Quite a different phenomenon is the use of online technologies to directly expose individual perpetrators of sexual violence. One participant, Ruby, told the story of how she utilised Facebook to seek justice in the wake of her own sexual assault by a male acquaintance. She contacted this man and asked him to post a Facebook status admitting to the assault in detail. He complied with her requests, Ruby said, in the hopes that she would not take legal action. She explained, however, that she took this course of action in an attempt to gain justice for a crime that she did not think would be taken seriously by the legal system, given she was intoxicated at the time. In this way, her story resonates with the three cases analysed by Salter (2013) in which women used social media to publish extrajudicial

allegations of sexual violence, with the aim of holding perpetrators accountable for their actions. As noted earlier, Salter (2013) builds on Fraser's notion of subaltern counterpublics, to examine the ways in which online counterpublics provide new and unique opportunities for girls and women like Ruby to seek justice and revenge for sexual violence in ways that counteract and challenge social and legal norms. This kind of "trial by internet", as Jyoti coins it, can be a powerful opportunity for those who lack "access to, or faith in, the mechanisms of the public sphere and the criminal justice system" (Salter 2013, 238). As a form of 'vigilante justice' it is reminiscent of some early feminist anti-rape activism that identified and exposed perpetrators of sexual violence through means such as publishing their identities in feminist newspapers (Gavey 2009).

In Ruby's case, however, although the man publicly admitted the sexual assault, she faced victim-blaming from his friends, and many of them made excuses for his actions. Thus, although she was able to actively pursue justice for sexual violence through social media, her case shows, as do those discussed by Salter, how fragile this power can be; and how wider cultural and institutional change is required to move beyond outcomes shaped by conventional constructions of the ideal victim.

### **Conclusion**

In the wake of a high profile exposé of systematic sexual violation conducted and promoted (on social media) by a group of Auckland teenage boys, public attention to sexual violence and rape culture was particularly prominent in New Zealand in 2014. Widespread condemnation of the boys' actions co-existed with minimizations and victim-blaming (see New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse 2013). Critiques of rape culture and an inadequate criminal justice system response circulated alongside contestations of the very

notion of rape culture (Gavey 2014). In this charged context we interviewed young people who were critical of rape culture to find out more about their encounters with, and responses to, it on social media. They spoke about elements of rape culture in ways that emphasised its pervasiveness in their everyday lives, both online and elsewhere. Elements such as the normalization of male sexual conquest, the everyday shaming of women's sexual expressions, and victim blaming for sexual assault were described in ways that situated them within a broader matrix of sexism, which both fuelled and reinforced rape culture. Several participants observed that within this matrix everyday forms of sexism as well as more overt and threatening expressions of misogyny appeared not to be noticed by and/or were taken for granted as natural and normal within mainstream culture.

The young people we spoke with also, however, discussed a diverse range of ways in which they acted against this matrix of sexism by identifying and contesting elements of rape culture. Several scholars (e.g., Harris 2008; Keller 2012; McLean and Maalsen 2013) suggest we may need to rethink what counts as activism, and although we did not set out to interview activists *per se*, the accounts of many of our participants resonate with recent discussions of online activism. Rentschler (2014), for instance, in examining feminist social media responses to rape culture, identifies its key features as providing “testimonial, advice giving, and cultures of support” (68). This fits with our participants' accounts of the value of social media in providing feminist education and safe, inclusive, intersectional spaces. As individuals who notice a matrix of sexism that remains invisible or appears acceptable within mainstream culture, many of our participants could be said to occupy marginalized cultural spaces. Yet through their engagement with social media, they were able to access and participate in an alternative – networked and collective – cultural space. The way that online feminist social media, and in particular Tumblr, seemed to operate allows it to provide the dual functions of counterpublics: “withdrawal and re-entry into the wider communicative

flows of the public sphere” (Asen 2000, 429; Fraser 1990). Such counterpublic spaces are essential, it has been suggested, for nurturing shared culture and fostering collective resistance by marginalised groups (Fraser 1990; Squires 2002). According to many of the young critics we interviewed this online feminist counterpublic provided a “whole other world” (Ivy) that resourced them with the support, knowledge and tools to critically respond to rape culture.

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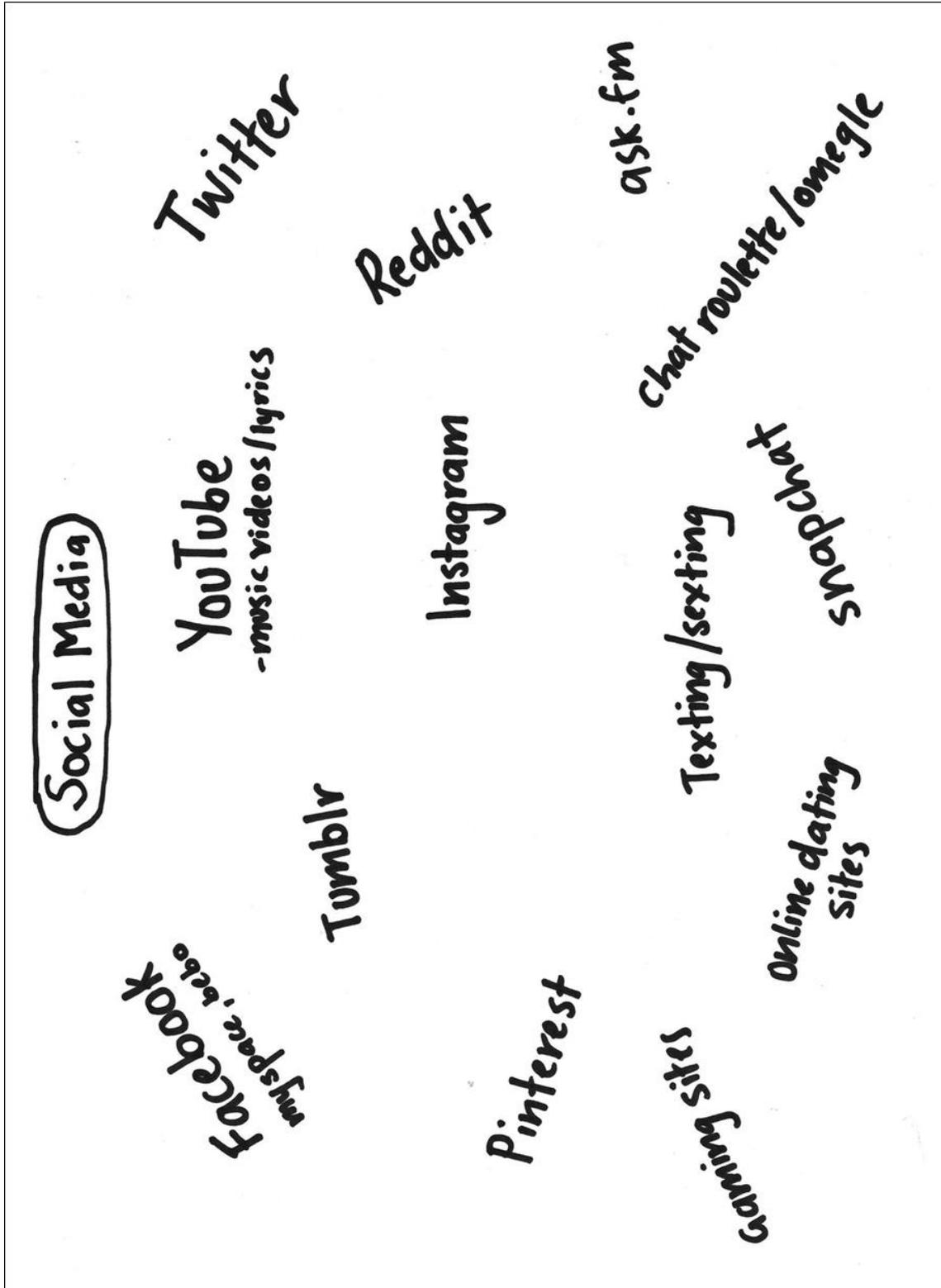
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Appendix A

Social Media Map



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<sup>1</sup> [www.sexualpoliticsnow.org.nz](http://www.sexualpoliticsnow.org.nz)

<sup>2</sup> New Zealander of European descent.

<sup>3</sup> We have also noticed a shift in this direction in feminist online spaces in the year since we completed our interviews.